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Contents

Vol. 14 No. 2 SEPTEMBER 2025	ii
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF	v
EDITORIAL BOARD	v
Educational Research for Change in the era of Multilingualism, Translanguaging, Decolonisation and Neoliberalism in Higher Education	vii
Language as a Responsibility in Teacher Education: Multilingual Pedagogies for Higher Education in South Africa	1
Oral Versus Written Assessments: A Reflective Study on Promoting Equality in Evaluations in Higher Education	14
Parents' and Teachers' Views on the Use of Mother Tongue for Learning and Teaching in a Quintile 1 Primary School.....	34
Challenging Monolingualism: A Global South Perspective on Translanguaging in Teacher Education	52
An Insightful Look Into Mathematics Teachers' Navigation of Indigenisation as a Pedagogic Approach: A Contribution Toward Decolonisation	67
Ubuntu Pedagogies as a Curriculum Practice to Reimagine Multilingualism in Higher Education Through African Communal Values: A South African Perspective.....	73
What We Want: Student Voices in Shaping a New African University	87
Determinants of Translanguaging Pedagogy Acceptance and Uptake in Multilingual University Classroom Discourses.....	108
Transformation and Inclusivity in Translanguaging Through Transliteration: Perspectives of isiZulu Home-Language Students on Discipline-Specific Terminology in isiZulu	124
Reclaiming Academic Autonomy in South African Higher Education: Decolonial Multilingualism as Counter-Hegemonic Praxis against Neoliberal Market Forces	141
Leveraging Multilingual Interventions at a South African University: A Decolonial Perspective....	158
Decolonising Our Teaching by Embracing Drama Pedagogy and Theatre in Education in Higher Education Classes	168
Research Studies on the Role of African Languages for Curriculum Transformation and Decolonisation in Higher Education	180
Multilingual Pedagogies as an Enabler in Creating and Fostering Learner Engagement in English Second Language Literature Classrooms.....	193
Translanguaging for Epistemic Access and Inclusion in a Basic Computing Module – A Freirean Reflective Account.....	209
Theorising Views of Bilingual/Multilingual Undergraduate Students on English-Medium Policy at a University in South Africa	230

South African Universities at a Crossroads: The Imperialist Global Knowledge Economy as a Barrier to Multilingual Higher Education.....	245
Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Linguaging, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education	260
Linguistic Repertoires in the Writing Experiences of Multilingual Postgraduate Students in a Higher Education Institution	275
Equity and Epistemic Justice of English-Medium Instruction in the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Realism Perspective	288
Student's Ontological Journey Towards Academic Success: Indigenous Languages as Empowering Tools for Lifelong Learning.....	302
<i>Implementing and Promoting Multilingualism: Speaking Through Different Tongues in South African Higher Education Spaces</i>	<i>316</i>
ALASA Conference: African languages beyond expansion and preservation in the digital age	318

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Educational Research for Change in the era of Multilingualism, Translanguaging, Decolonisation and Neoliberalism in Higher Education

Guest Editors

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This special issue attempts to grapple with the challenges that plague the South African higher education system 30 years into our democratic dispensation. Largely driven by the growing calls for multilingual and translanguaging interventions in the classroom, transformation and decolonisation, curriculum reforms, inclusive teaching and learning practices—and, more recently, the need to respond to the neoliberal and market-driven logics in the public university in South Africa—this issue brings together these complex and contested conversations and seeks to explore the extent to which these forces have shaped and influenced the higher education sector.

The special issue opens with **Maryna Reyneke** and **Kotie Kaiser's** paper, "Language as a Responsibility in Teacher Education: Multilingual Pedagogies for Higher Education in South Africa." In their paper, they argue that lecturers need to be deliberative in embracing what they term "linguistic diversity" in the classroom. Drawing on translanguaging theory and Ruiz's model of ideological orientations of language, they reveal the complex strategies that are implemented by participants to tap into students' linguistic repertoires, promoting inclusivity and learning. Reporting on the parents' and educators' views and understanding of the use of home language for teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase, **Keamogetswe Moganedi**, **Vivienne Hlatshwayo**, and **Thembeke Shange** employ a qualitative approach to interview 10 parents and 10 educators their paper, "Parents' and Teachers' Views on the Use of Mother Tongue for Learning and Teaching in a Quintile 1 Primary School." They reveal the complex interplay of how even though parents know and recognise the benefits of home language, they nonetheless prefer English as a language of teaching and learning for their children. The authors suggest that future research could contend with this dilemma, highlighting the benefits of multilingual teaching to parents. In her article, "Oral Versus Written Assessments: A Reflective Study on Promoting Equality in Evaluations in Higher Education," **Ruth T. Nyamadzawo** continues this linguistic turn, focusing on oral tests as an assessment tool for first-year students. Through a reflective review, she focuses on the challenges associated with the administering of oral assessments in an examination format, and the rising concerns around validity, reliability, and fairness in such pedagogic practices. The author contends that structured oral examinations can be seen as a better assessment tool when used in a translanguaging context.

Beyond parents and educators, the following three papers grapple with curriculum and pedagogic interventions, drawing primarily on ubuntu as a philosophical praxis. **Mariyeni Mtanha-Matariro** and **Leketi Makalela's** paper, "Challenging Monolingualism: A Global South Perspective on Translanguaging in Teacher Education" investigates the practical application, and the impact, of translanguaging instruction in a postgraduate programme. Through a case study research methodology framed by ubuntu philosophy, the authors reveal that ubuntu translanguaging practices have the discursive capacity to transcend narrowly defined language boundaries and offer holistic linguistic repertoires. They suggest that comprehensive curricular reforms are necessary in order to prioritise cultural relevance and interconnectedness within comparable Global South contexts. Bringing these lessons closer to home, **Makhosi Madimabe-Mofokeng**, **Walters Doh Nubia**, and **Heloise Sathorar's** "An Insightful Look Into Mathematics Teachers' Navigation of Indigenisation as a Pedagogic Approach: A Contribution Toward Decolonisation" explores the pedagogical possibilities of including local and Indigenous knowledge systems in the field of mathematics. Using a qualitative interpretivist study, they reveal that rural teachers have some pedagogical insights into how Indigenous and local knowledge could be enacted in the classrooms. They recommend that in order to achieve real and material decolonisation in the field of mathematics, implementation of the curriculum needs to be flexible to allow for the possibility of local and Indigenous knowledge systems. Complementing this work, **Xolani Khohliso**, **Mochina Mphuthi**, and **Ernest Mpindo's** paper, "Ubuntu Pedagogies as a Curriculum Practice to Reimagine Multilingualism in Higher Education Through African Communal Values: A South African Perspective," investigates how Indigenous pedagogies such as ubuntu can be utilised to reimagine multilingualism. Through the use of a PICO framework, their findings reveal that ubuntu potentially creates a learning environment that promotes Indigenous psychology and ontologies.

Providing a different shift in its focus areas, **Tendayi Dzinoreva's** article, "What We Want: Student Voices in Shaping a New African University" provides a persuasive argument on the need to re-centre and re-place student voices in the transition to the new African university. Using both the participatory involvement of students in creating a new African university, and Dunne and Zanstra's Students as Change Agents Model as a theoretical lens, the author contends that students' role and voice in higher education governance are critical. Through the use of questionnaire, she reveals that students are willing and ready to use dialogue and take part in the transformation of higher education—provided they have access to equal representation in the governance structures. For **Jubilee Chikasha**, this student voice could be enabled and enhanced through the acceptance and uptake of translanguaging pedagogy in multilingual university classrooms. In his "Determinants of Translanguaging Pedagogy Acceptance and Uptake in Multilingual University Classroom Discourses," Chikasha reveals several factors that affect translanguaging acceptance and uptake, including 1) prior experience(s) in translanguaging, 2) aligning home languages to languages of the classroom, 3) debunking the nexus between English and academic currency, 4) student-parent/guardian attitudes towards Indigenous languages, 5) language policy implementation, 6) intellectualisation of Indigenous languages and resource development, and 7) synchronising language of learning, teaching and assessment. The author suggests that the efficacy and effectiveness of translanguaging in teaching and learning alone are insufficient for the successful implementation of translanguaging in the classroom. Focusing on isiZulu as a translingual pedagogic tool, **Muhle MaShezi Sibisi** and **Hloniphani Ndebele's** "Transformation and Inclusivity in Translanguaging Through Transliteration" focuses on the often

hidden and overlooked perspectives of isiZulu home-language students on discipline-specific terminology in isiZulu. Their findings further support the use of transliteration in developing terminologies in isiZulu as a transformative and inclusive approach to the use of African languages in South African higher education. They recommend that for bilingual isiZulu/English students, transliteration affords invaluable cognitive benefits and confidence in their academic endeavours.

Turning attention to the growing commodification, commercialisation, and corporate colonisation of the public university in South Africa, the next three articles respond to the neoliberal and decolonial pressures that confront the higher education sector. **Fortunate Mugwaze's** paper, "Reclaiming Academic Autonomy in South African Higher Education: Decolonial Multilingualism as Counter-Hegemonic Praxis Against Neoliberal Market Forces," proposes what she calls "decolonial multilingualism" in the university. Drawing on decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, and linguistic justice, she employs document analysis and a systematic literature review to bridge the gap between multilingual language policy and practice. She reveals that neoliberal funding models and global validation systems undermine the implementation of decolonial multilingual policies, limiting academic autonomy. Continuing on the decolonial pathway, **Nomalungelo Ngubane's** "Leveraging Multilingual Interventions at a South African University: A Decolonial Perspective" explores how multilingual practices are being leveraged at a South African university as both a transformative and decolonial project. Using a decolonial theory as analytical lens, the author interrogates the epistemic, linguistic, and pedagogical interventions aimed at dismantling the dominance of English in a higher education institution. She employs a critical analysis to expose the contradictions and complexities of multilingual interventions in higher education and calls for the re-centring of multilingualism as a central organising project of the university. **Logamurthie Athiemoolam and Martin Braund's** article, "Decolonising Our Teaching by Embracing Drama Pedagogy and Theatre in Education in Higher Education Classes," provides a critical reflection, and draws on how drama pedagogy and theatre in education have the potential to contribute to decolonising teaching and learning by focusing on the development of students' critical and creative thinking skills.

In "Research Studies on the Role of African Languages for Curriculum Transformation and Decolonisation in Higher Education," **Sindisiwe Cynthia Msani and Sanele Nsele** argue that a large number of studies on curriculum transformation and decolonisation tend to overlook the role of language in transforming and decolonising the university. They suggest that language plays a significant role in resisting and subverting the colonial influences in curricula, and that African languages play a crucial role in enabling students' access to knowledge. In similar fashion, **Sboniso Praisegod Zondi's** "Multilingual Pedagogies as an Enabler in Creating and Fostering Learner Engagement in English Second Language Literature Classrooms" supports this argument. For Zondi, basic education and the technical and vocational colleges are largely under-researched when it comes to translanguaging and code-switching. Through a qualitative interpretivist study, and with the use of grounded theory and ubuntu pedagogy, Zondi explores translanguaging and code-switching as pedagogies of choice for ESL teachers, particularly in teaching literature. His findings reveal that translanguaging and code-switching enhance learner engagement and positively impact formal and informal assessments. Extending this argument into basic computing, **Joshua Jacobs' "Translanguaging for Epistemic Access and Inclusion in a Basic Computing Module: A Freirean Reflective Account"** offers an interesting account of the use of translanguaging in an ADDIE model. Jacobs draws on Freire's critical pedagogy to reflect on the

affordances and challenges of translanguaging, the balance of structure and agency in blended learning, and the lecturer's role in dismantling digital and linguistic exclusion.

The next four articles all make a compelling case for why bilingual/multilingual/ translanguaging interventions are necessary not only in the classroom but for the decolonial university to emerge in South Africa. **Julliet Munyaradzi's** "Theorising Views of Bilingual/Multilingual Undergraduate Students on English-Medium Policy at a University in South Africa" explores and theorises views of 12 bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students. Her findings reveal that although the role of English is acknowledged, it diminishes effective learning for some bilingual/multilingual students who encounter English-medium policy as a barrier to learning. **Alois S. Baleni's** "South African Universities at a Crossroads: The Imperialist Global Knowledge Economy as a Barrier to Multilingual Higher Education" relies on critical discourse analysis to explicate the vision and mission statements, and institutional language policies of a South African historically Black university, historically White university, and a university of technology. Baleni unmasks the deeply institutionalised global market competitive posture of universities, and unravels the social injustices that are created in such climates. **Sibusiso Clifford Ndlangamandla, Berrington Ntombela, and Nomalungelo Ngubane's** "Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Languaging, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education" deals with the mismatch between ontologies of language and languaging, on the one hand, and language policy or language teaching, on the other. They draw on coloniality and decoloniality of language and communication, and explore what it could mean to decolonise language and communication in a university context, despite the abiding and enduring existence of the project of capitalist neoliberal principles and policies governing higher education. **Caroline Fleischauer, Berrington Ntombela, and Nomalungelo Ngubane's** "Linguistic Repertoires in the Writing Experiences of Multilingual Postgraduate Students in a Higher Education Institution" critically examines the writing experiences of multilingual postgraduate students in a specific higher education institution in South Africa. They use Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia to explore how multilingual postgraduate students navigate and negotiate their linguistic repertoires. Through the use of qualitative research methods, they reveal how multilingual postgraduate students face challenges when navigating between creative and innovative thinking in their home languages and expressing their ideas in English to meet the postgraduate writing expectations and standards. They suggest that these linguistic tensions affect academic success of multilingual postgraduate students.

Our penultimate paper, **Berrington Xolani Siphosakhe Ntombela's** "Equity and Epistemic Justice of English-Medium Instruction in the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Realism Perspective," interrogates equity and epistemic justice posed by the dominance of English-medium instruction in higher education. He argues that the processes of internationalisation and globalisation work in complicity with neocolonialism, perpetuating the subjugation of local languages and barring access to knowledge for the majority. Ntombela adopts a critical realist lens and highlights the epistemic justice and linguistic inequality that is produced by the hegemony of the English language. He suggests that English-medium instruction is responsible for the troubles of epistemic access because it serves the aspirations of the minority elite at the expense of the democratic majority. **Ntokozo Zulu and Mzuyabonga Gumede's** "Student's Ontological Journey Towards Academic Success: Indigenous Languages as Empowering Tools for Lifelong Learning" closes the special issue by conceptually propose a decolonial framework in the promotion of Indigenous languages as transformative educational

resources. Their conclusion is that the integration of Indigenous languages into institutional policies and pedagogical practices valorises Indigenous students' worldviews, which implies equitable academic success and lifelong learning.

In addition to the research articles, this special issue features a **Berrington Ntombela's** report on the African Language Association of Southern Africa's conference held 8–11 July 2025 at the Royal Hotel, Polokwane. In this special issue, we also include a review contributed by **Edwin Mohatlane** of the book, *Implementing and Promoting Multilingualism: Speaking Through Different Tongues in South African Higher Education Spaces* (2024, UKZN Press). Both the report and the review enrich the issue by highlighting current debates, documenting scholarly conversations, and providing readers with resources for further critical engagement.

We wish to thank our colleagues at the *Educational Research for Social Change* journal and at Nelson Mandela University for their support in helping us to bring this special issue to life. We especially wish to thank all the authors and contributors for entrusting their work with us. We are indebted to them.

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Language as a Responsibility in Teacher Education: Multilingual Pedagogies for Higher Education in South Africa¹

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Abstract

Working in a multilingual higher education context demands that lecturers not only acknowledge and embrace linguistic diversity to enhance inclusivity and equity but also promote knowledge access for academic success. At the North-West University, there is a concerted effort to equip lecturers with multilingual pedagogies. To this end, lecturers across the university enrolled in a short learning programme (SLP) in multilingual pedagogies and started implementing translanguaging as a resource for student empowerment and inclusion. This paper presents the design and implementation of the SLP, focusing on: 1) creating awareness of students' multilingual repertoires, 2) stimulating pedagogic innovation among lecturers, 3) employing pedagogic strategies that address multilingualism as a responsibility. The study is framed by translanguaging theory, Ruiz's (1984) model of ideological orientations of language, with an additional dimension—language as a responsibility. We also look at the sociocultural theory and scaffolding. An action research approach was adopted, with successive iterations of the course informed by participant feedback. The article shares hands-on strategies implemented by Faculty of Education participants to tap into students' linguistic repertoires, promoting inclusivity and learning through scaffolding of speaking, writing, and thinking, aligned with sociocultural theory (Li & Zhang, 2020; Wertsch et al., 1993). The findings reveal important shifts in lecturer orientations, practices, and innovations when engaging with multilingual pedagogies.

Keywords: multilingual pedagogies, translanguaging, teacher education, higher education, South Africa, sociocultural theory, language policy.

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Introduction

Multilingualism is a defining characteristic of the South African educational landscape. With eleven official languages, higher education institutions are challenged to create inclusive learning environments that acknowledge and leverage linguistic diversity for academic success. The North-West University (NWU) Language Policy (2018; 2022) promotes a functional multilingual environment, advocating for the valorisation of students' mother tongues to ensure epistemic access. To support the implementation of the NWU Language Policy, each of the eight faculties across three campuses was requested to draw up language plans.

Despite supportive policy frameworks (Department of Higher Education & Training [DHET], 2020; NWU, 2018; 2022) and faculty specific language plans that should steer implementation, many lecturers still perceive linguistic diversity as a barrier rather than a resource. This creates a gap between policy and classroom practice or what scholars like Nkomo (2022) referred to as compliance without commitment towards implementation.

The aim of this study is to explore how a short learning programme (SLP) on multilingual pedagogies can assist in closing this gap by equipping lecturers from the Faculty of Education with hands-on strategies, such as translanguaging practices, to promote inclusive learning. Objectives include creating awareness of multilingual repertoires among lecturers, fostering pedagogical innovation in teaching and assessment, and shifting orientations towards treating language as a responsibility in initial teacher education.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in translanguaging theory, Ruiz's (1984) ideological orientations to language, and sociocultural theory. In addition, research on teacher preparation for multilingual classrooms underscores the importance of equipping educators with strategies to navigate linguistic diversity. Heugh (2015) argued that translanguaging and genre pedagogy provide powerful tools for teacher training in multilingual education. Hornberger and Link (2012) demonstrated how translanguaging practices support teacher learning and development of biliteracy pedagogies in transnational contexts. Similarly, Probyn (2015) highlighted how pedagogical translanguaging can bridge discourses in South African science classrooms, offering practical insights for teacher education. These studies collectively strengthen the rationale for focusing on lecturers' development of multilingual pedagogies in higher education.

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical and Epistemic Resource

The Welsh term for translanguaging, *trawsieithu*, was first used by Cen Williams in 1994 when he referred to the pedagogical practice where students in bilingual Welsh/English classrooms alternated between these two languages while working on the linguistic skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Since 1994, the term translanguaging has been increasingly used in the scholarly literature to refer to both the complex and fluid language practices of bilinguals, as well as the pedagogical approaches that leverage those practices. The concept was further developed by García and Wei (2014), who emphasised that translanguaging is more than a pedagogical approach and should be seen as an epistemological stance. These authors argued that translanguaging is "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages" and emphasised meaning-making, communication, and learning when multilingual speakers shuttle between languages (García & Wei, 2014, p. 21).

The focus is thus on what students can do with their languages irrespective of whether the languages have been developed to any degree as academic languages or not (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2018). It is all about making meaning in dynamic and diverse contexts by using multiple languages interchangeably

and in strategic ways to communicate (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). According to García and Wei (2014), translanguaging allows for an ideological shift from languages as static entities to fluid repertoires, and positions multilingualism as the norm, rather than the exception in modern education. Multilingual pedagogies entail specific teaching strategies that allow for the process of tapping into students' fluid linguistic repertoires through translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014). The latter was defined by Coetzee-Van Rooy (2012, p. 89) as “the range of languages known from which multilingual people draw the resources they need to communicate in multilingual societies.”

Aligned with constructivism that underpins modern education, the student is placed at the centre of teaching and learning because “translanguaging stems from the speaker up and not from the language down” (García & Kleyn, 2016, p. 23). The lecturer, equipped with pedagogical content knowledge and skills, acts as facilitator who can adapt pedagogy as needed to steer students' processes of meaning-making and understanding (García et al., 2017). As a pedagogical resource, translanguaging enables educators to move beyond monolingual norms of instruction and instead, use students' full linguistic repertoires to deepen understanding. It facilitates access to content, supports critical thinking, and affirms linguistic identities. Research by Canagarajah (2011) and García and Kleyn (2016) show how translanguaging supports multilingual learners in navigating complex academic concepts by drawing on all their linguistic resources.

Translanguaging is also epistemic in that it challenges dominant knowledge systems rooted in colonial language ideologies. By allowing learners to express themselves in multiple languages, it validates diverse ways of knowing. According to Wei (2018), translanguaging encourages the production of new knowledge that emerges from the interaction of languages and cultural experiences, disrupting traditional Eurocentric epistemologies. It is important for initial teacher education to include deliberate translanguaging pedagogies, enabling future educators to leverage the linguistic resources of learners rather than suppress them. This requires a shift from language-as-code to language-as-practice, promoting inclusive and culturally sustaining pedagogies.

Language as a Responsibility: Extending Ruiz's (1984) Framework

Ruiz (1984) originally introduced the following three ideological orientations toward language in educational policy:

- Language as a problem: Views linguistic diversity as a barrier to academic and social integration.
- Language as a right: Recognises the legal rights of individuals to use their languages.
- Language as a resource: Sees linguistic diversity as an asset to be leveraged for social, cognitive, and economic benefits.

Building on Ruiz, scholars like Hult and Hornberger (2016) and Stroud and Kerfoot (2013) proposed an additional orientation—language as a responsibility. This concept implies that institutions and educators have a moral and pedagogical obligation to create environments where linguistic diversity is not only protected but actively nurtured. While policymakers must support linguistic inclusion as part of social justice and decolonisation efforts, and institutions must resist monolingual assessment and curriculum policies, teacher educators must equip student teachers with the skills to teach in and through multiple languages

Language as a responsibility demands a relational, ethical stance toward language use in education—one that recognises power, access, and equity as central to multilingualism. This stance of language as a

responsibility was also supported by the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (DHET, 2020), which provides a policy document that requires all higher education institutions in South Africa to actively develop and strengthen Indigenous languages as languages of scholarship, teaching and learning, and communication at tertiary level. Aligned with the national policy, the NWU (2018; 2022) Language Policy proposed a policy of functional multilingualism, which means that four official languages shall be used for carrying out the work of the University: Setswana, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English. The intellectualisation of multilingualism should be perceived as a development concept that needs to be given effect in an organised and organic manner. Therefore, the two African languages are to be simultaneously developed as languages of communication and of teaching and learning, alongside Afrikaans and English.

Sociocultural Theory and Scaffolding

The core premises of the sociocultural theory, rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), posit that learning is a social process mediated by language and interaction. Central to sociocultural theory is the Zone of Proximal Development—the distance between what learners can do independently and what they can do with guidance or scaffolding. Scaffolding, as conceptualised by Wood et al. (1976), refers to the supportive structures provided by more knowledgeable others (teachers, peers) that enable learners to perform tasks within the Zone of Proximal Development. Over time, these supports are gradually withdrawn as learners internalise the skills or concepts.

In the context of teacher education, lecturers scaffold novice teachers by modelling translanguaging strategies, providing collaborative opportunities, and offering feedback. Scaffolding furthermore occurs through dialogic teaching, where reflection, co-construction of knowledge, and language play a critical role. Sociocultural approaches value the multilingual repertoires of both teacher educators and student teachers, situating language not just as a tool of instruction but as a central medium of mediation. More recent scholarship (e.g. Hammond, 2001; Mercer, 2019) emphasised that scaffolding must be responsive to the sociocultural backgrounds of learners, particularly in multilingual classrooms. This aligns well with the ethical imperative of "language as a responsibility," creating synergy between these theories.

Research Methodology

An action research approach was used to design, implement, and refine the SLP. This approach was selected because it is grounded in practice and undertaken by practitioners (course facilitators and participants) to improve pedagogy (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Munn-Giddings, 2012). Furthermore, this type of research is iterative because it combines theory and practice in cycles of action and reflection aimed at solving a common problem, while deepening understanding of the broader social, psychological, economic, and political forces that have shaped the issue (Bhana, 1999). It does this by drawing on the resources of all participants in addressing the needs of the community in question, in this case, university students and their lecturers. The nature of collected data, analytic methods, and resulting reflections and actions emerge from collaborative engagement within a community in partnership with the researchers.

From the input received from the SLP on multilingual pedagogies, course participants created multilingual interventions for their own courses, which were then evaluated as assignments. Critical reflections from both the course teachers and the participants on their assignments and on their experiences implementing their interventions fed into the revision of 1) the SLP course itself, and 2) the lecturers' interventions with their own students, thereby creating multiple iterations of the action research cycle at different levels.

The study had three cycles, which focussed on the following research questions:

- Cycle 1: What are the orientations of lecturers towards language and multilingualism in their classrooms? During this cycle, lecturers had to complete their own language portraits to raise awareness of the value of their own and their students' linguistic repertoires. They were also expected to complete assignments to guide their reflections on the role of language in their own personal and professional lives and to challenge their views of language as a barrier to learning.
- Cycle 2: What multilingual strategies can be used to promote the orientation of language as a resource and language as a responsibility in different fields of study in tertiary education? As part of their assignments in this cycle, lecturers were challenged to reflect on different examples of multilingual pedagogies and to adapt and implement them in innovative ways for their own classrooms. They then had to reflect on their own practice, and how students responded.
- Cycle 3: How did the orientations to language and the pedagogy of lecturers change during the training? At the end of the course, lecturers had to reflect on which strategies they would continue to use or explore, and why.

Ethical Considerations

The study formed part of a larger institutional research project on multilingualism for which ethical clearance was obtained from the Language Matters Research Committee in 2021. All lecturers who enrolled for the SLP were informed that their reflections, assignments, and questionnaire responses could be used for research purposes, and informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by pseudonyms and removal of identifying details.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were derived from reflective exercises undertaken by participants throughout successive course cycles. Structured opportunities were provided for participants to articulate and discuss their experiences and perceptions of implementing multilingual pedagogies within collaborative group settings. Changes in participants' attitudes, pedagogical orientations, and self-reported confidence in multilingual teaching were evaluated using pre- and post-course questionnaires.

In action research, data analysis serves both to understand practice and to guide change. Practice-generated artefacts—such as participants' assignments in this study—constitute primary data, offering new avenues for intervention. Qualitative data from assignments, reflective exercises, and questionnaires were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in lecturers' attitudes toward multilingualism, the implementation and perceived effectiveness of translanguaging strategies, and reported student outcomes.

Findings and Discussion

The presentation of findings is structured in three parts to provide clarity and coherence. First, each concept is briefly introduced in relation to its theoretical and pedagogical significance. Second, the application of these concepts is illustrated through lecturers' engagement with specific activities, supported by excerpts from their reflections. Finally, the synthesis highlights the broader implications by showing how these engagements contributed to heightened multilingual awareness, shifts in professional identity, and alignment with pedagogical practices.

Creating Awareness of Multilingual Repertoires

Language portraits are widely used to depict individuals' multilingual repertoires (Coetzee-Van Rooy & Peters, 2021), to map language attitudes with spatial and colour cues (Soares et al., 2020), and to illustrate identity and embodied language experiences (Stavrakaki & Manoli, 2023). By placing selected

languages centrally or peripherally on a human silhouette, participants signal differences in perceived importance or proficiency. Studies further indicate that portraits can elicit a broader range of languages than traditional surveys, while also highlighting affective associations. Importantly, portraits reveal nuances of translanguaging, multimodal expression, and raciolinguistic dynamics in diverse contexts.

Within the SLP, language portraits were used as reflective tools to help lecturers recognise the linguistic diversity within their classrooms. This activity fostered awareness of students' multilingual identities and challenged deficit perspectives on multilingualism. The Music Education lecturer reflected:

I think it allowed me to align more with NWU and Faculty goals relating to multilingualism, excellent teaching and learning, and assessment and meeting student needs. I also believe that students will feel more valued and supported in classrooms where we apply multilingual pedagogies, which will also foster a sense of respect, appreciation of difference, belonging, equity, cohesion, and an ethic of care.

The Business Education lecturer similarly noted:

By improving my own multilingual awareness, I could move to the next level of multilingual teaching.

Likewise, the Education Law lecturer explained:

During the course, I came to realise that I excluded some cultures during my teaching and learning. I became sensitive about the issue, and am addressing this in my classes.

Lecturers' pre-course reflections revealed three primary reasons for enrolling: professional development, better understanding of multilingualism in the diverse South African context, and alignment with the university's language policy. Illustrative responses include:

I would like to broaden my knowledge of how I can enhance my students' teaching and learning experiences. (Music Education lecturer)

I would like to respect my students and the languages they speak as well as employ the language policy of the faculty in a correct manner. (Life Orientation Education lecturer)

To develop my own professional competencies to support my multilingual students better in their journey to becoming educators themselves. (Technology Education lecturer)

These reflections demonstrate that language portraits not only raised awareness of individual multilingual repertoires but also motivated lecturers to engage with multilingual pedagogies. This heightened awareness translated into shifts in professional identity, a stronger sense of alignment with institutional priorities, and a commitment to fostering inclusive classrooms. The findings resonate with le Grange et al.'s (2006) model of staff development, which argued that training opportunities should be informed simultaneously by lecturers' needs, institutional requirements, and national imperatives.

Stimulating Pedagogic Innovation

When staff members shared examples of assignments and activities that they had planned or presented in their classes, their reflections illustrated the *principle of reciprocal engagement* (Boden,

2019). This concept refers to innovative strategies that do not necessarily follow a linear sequence but instead, unfold in cyclical processes where one idea stimulates another. Repetition and adaptation reinforce learning and create momentum in teaching practice. Lecturers described how engaging with multilingual pedagogies changed their perspectives and practices. As one Music Education lecturer reflected:

It has changed the way that I view multilingual pedagogies and how I approach multilingualism in my teaching. It also influenced the way that I select material for my classes. . . . I think I just need to explore the real-life application more. To consider how I could apply the pedagogy and make it a central part of my teaching, learning and assessment practices without it being a difficult process—to truly integrate it into all that I do.

These pedagogic innovations took various forms, including cooperative teaching and student-centred learning, scaffolding through academic texts, and shifts in pedagogical perspectives that broadened lecturers' repertoires for teaching in multilingual classrooms. Taken together, these innovations demonstrate how increased multilingual awareness fostered motivation to experiment with new strategies, shifts in professional identity, and closer alignment between lecturers' practices and institutional commitments to multilingualism. The cyclical, reflective process enabled lecturers to see language not merely as a medium of communication but as a responsibility that shaped their pedagogical choices and student engagement.

By linking these findings to established literature, the study underscores how teacher preparation in multilingual pedagogies not only equips lecturers with practical strategies but also shifts ideological orientations towards treating language as a responsibility. This demonstrates the transformative potential of the SLP in contributing to institutional change and advancing decolonial, inclusive practices in higher education.

Cooperative Teaching and Student-Centred Learning

The SLP encouraged lecturers to adopt cooperative and student-centred approaches, recognising students' home languages as valuable learning resources. Group discussions in mother tongues, followed by synthesis in the language of instruction, exemplified this principle. One Geography Education lecturer, who did not speak his students' African languages, designed an assignment requiring students to summarise complex concepts in PowerPoint slides with pictures and voice-overs in their home languages. Students then assessed one another's work using an English rubric via the learning management system. This enabled authentic use of home languages while maintaining assessment standards. As he reflected:

language should serve learning [and enable] students to engage better with their own learning.

This approach illustrates how lecturers can facilitate multilingual engagement even without direct proficiency, reinforcing the idea of language as a responsibility that empowers students to use their full repertoires.

Scaffolding Learning Through Academic Texts

Lecturers were trained to deconstruct complex academic texts, breaking them into manageable linguistic and conceptual components and using multiple languages to support learning. The orientation of language as a problem or a barrier to learning was mentioned by the Technology Education lecturer when reflecting on the need for scaffolding using different languages. She indicated that she did not realise

how badly language can really hinder learning, and how complicated all the languages make our efforts to teach and support learning.

A Business Studies lecturer who found that students struggled with invigilated sit-down tests designed a cheat sheet template where students could add pictures, definitions, and explanations in their own languages as well as diagrams to illustrate certain concepts. Students were allowed to use their cheat sheets for tests that assessed higher-order skills such as evaluation and analysis. In his reflection afterwards, this lecturer highlighted the importance of scaffolding and the role of the mother tongue in promoting understanding of difficult assignments or assessments. He concluded:

I can help students to learn; it's part of a continuous process, not part of a product. I have to invest enough in the process to get a quality product.

These examples highlight how scaffolding through multilingual resources enables deeper conceptual understanding and validates students' linguistic repertoires in academic contexts.

Shifts in Pedagogical Perspectives

Final reflections revealed shifts in lecturers' pedagogical perspectives, as beliefs were challenged about what is possible and desirable in multilingual classrooms (Pickering, 2006). Firstly, the lecturer in Music Education realised the important role of language in promoting effective assessment for and of learning:

I enjoyed reflecting on and challenging my own practices and especially considering the nature of assessment within multilingual contexts. I think this is vital as we are "forced" to work in environments where assessment is often product-oriented which unfortunately does not truly promote authentic learning and will not necessarily promote critical reflection, collaboration and meaningful learning.

In addition, the Business Studies lecturer was surprised by the positive feedback from his students when he translated one of his tests into Sesotho (an Indigenous African language):

An awareness was raised and my creativity around the matter was stimulated. One example of new knowledge gained is the importance of written translations. I asked 10 students to complete the translated test and all of the students gave feedback in the line that they feel "respected," "happy" etc. to see Sesotho on the paper

The Technology Education lecturer indicated she became more aware of the language challenges of her students, but is still of the opinion that it is not her responsibility to focus on students' mother tongues in her classroom:

It definitely made me sit up and take notice more than before, about the language issues students have. However, I must note: never ever in my teaching career have I had a cohort of students with such poor language development as in 2023. . . . I am a subject expert—not a language expert. I cannot be everything for everyone.

In contrast, the Music Education lecturer initially felt overwhelmed when she started with the course because she believed that the only way to assist her multilingual students was to become proficient in all the languages represented in her classroom. This belief was challenged, and she adjusted her pedagogic perspective on what was possible and desirable:

One of the most valuable lessons for me was that my perceptions that I need to be fluent in multiple languages to teach in this manner were also challenged which I found meaningful. I am excited by the idea of making students active participants in the TL and assessment process and to include their lived experiences in the classroom

This lecturer also acknowledged the centrality of language in assessment:

I enjoyed reflecting on and challenging my own practices . . . considering the nature of assessment within multilingual contexts.

By linking these findings to established literature, the study underscores how teacher preparation in multilingual pedagogies not only equips lecturers with practical strategies but also shifts ideological orientations towards treating language as a responsibility. This demonstrates the transformative potential of the SLP in contributing to institutional change and advancing decolonial, inclusive practices in higher education.

Limitations

This study is limited in several respects. Firstly, it was conducted within a single faculty at one South African university, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Secondly, the reliance on self-reported reflections and assignments introduces the possibility of subjectivity and social desirability bias. Thirdly, as course facilitators were also researchers, there is the potential for dual roles to influence interpretation of data, although the use of reflective cycles aimed to mitigate this. Finally, the absence of classroom observations and direct student performance data limits triangulation. These limitations, however, provide direction for future research that can expand the scope, diversify data sources, and strengthen the robustness of findings.

Conclusion

This study has shown that multilingualism should not be perceived as a barrier but as a resource and responsibility in teacher education. Findings from the SLP indicate that equipping lecturers with multilingual pedagogies enhances student engagement, promotes inclusivity, and improves academic success. The iterative action research design allowed lecturers to reflect critically and take ownership of their pedagogical responsibilities. This study also highlights broader implications:

- For teacher education curricula: Multilingual pedagogies should be embedded as a compulsory element in pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. This aligns with Heugh's

(2015) and Hornberger and Link's (2012) arguments for preparing teachers to draw on students' full repertoires.

- For institutional policy: The findings show that SLPs can effectively bridge the gap between institutional language policy and classroom practice, supporting implementation of the DHET's (2020) Language Policy Framework.
- For curriculum reform: Pedagogical translanguaging, as illustrated by Probyn (2015), provides sustainable ways to decolonise curricula, enabling higher education to move beyond monolingual models of assessment and teaching.
- For professional development: Ongoing lecturer training and reflection should be institutionalised to sustain shifts in pedagogical practice and ensure that multilingualism is treated as a shared responsibility rather than an individual initiative.

In conclusion, the notion of language as a responsibility adds an ethical and pedagogical dimension to existing frameworks. It provides a lens for reimagining teacher education in multilingual contexts, emphasising inclusivity, social justice, and epistemic access as central to authentic training and sustainable transformation in higher education.

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Oral Versus Written Assessments: A Reflective Study on Promoting Equality in Evaluations in Higher Education

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Abstract

The present study, through a reflective review, analysed oral tests as an assessment tool used for first-year students in the Management Sciences Faculty at Durban University of Technology. The purpose of this reflective review was to examine the practice of oral assessment in the context of translanguaging and to identify its impact. In this article, I describe my experiences facilitating oral exams in the module, and the lessons learnt along the way. The paper presents an overview of the oral assessment methods that were used. Student performance in, and attitudes towards, oral and written assessments were analysed. The key insights of this reflection were the challenges associated with administering oral assessments in an examination format. The study found that structured oral examinations were a fair assessment tool and encouraged inclusion and equity of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also highlighted that oral assessments were time consuming, invoked high stress levels in students, and needed infrastructural and human resource support. In conclusion, the paper highlighted that structured oral examinations can be a better assessment tool, and with some modifications in blueprinting, it is an acceptable translanguaging tool that can be used by various faculties. The article concludes by proposing recommendations under which oral assessments can be valid, reliable, and fair.

Keywords: oral exams, translanguaging, first-year student, equality, reflection, general education, anxiety

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Introduction

Oral assessments were a traditional tool for assessing student understanding before written assessments were adopted (Fenton, 2024). Currently, many institutions assess students through written examinations and tests such as multiple-choice or short-answer questions. It has been noted that the current heavy reliance on written assessment is because they are viewed as easier to administer and grade (Hazen, 2020; Kulasegaram & Rangachari, 2018), especially for larger class sizes. However, the disadvantage of many written exam formats at universities that service students from disadvantaged backgrounds is their inability to adequately capture the depth of the students' learning. This is especially so if they have students who are not proficient in English. In such cases, these students struggle to accurately interpret the given examination questions and express their understanding effectively (Afitska & Heaton, 2019).

This article draws from practitioner insights and experiences of an instructor of a law module in South African higher education. The stimulus for engaging in reflective practice was sparked during training workshops for a module, Cornerstone (Neerpath, 2016), which was offered by the General Education department at Durban University of Technology (DUT). This, coupled with prior observations of student challenges embedded in learning in a second language, prompted a desire to shift from the current mode of assessment. The alternative would be the use of translanguaging within an oral assessment setup. The rationale for this shift was grounded in the linguistic challenges South African students faced when they transitioned from high school to university, especially those who were in the Law for Life module. Particularly when it comes to English as a medium of instruction in higher education (Mheta et al., 2018; Nthabiseng et al., 2024), many students come from backgrounds where English is not the home language, and where subjects were taught in the local language, leading to difficulties in academic performance. Thus, students who are not proficient in English struggle with expressing their knowledge. A study by Rossouw (2018) found that Afrikaans-speaking students faced challenges when using English as a means of instruction, and this affected their performance in accounting courses. To address these issues, implementing oral assessment support systems would be ideal.

Several studies have provided evidence of the effectiveness of a multilingual approach, challenging the monolingual norm (Charamba & Zano, 2019; Hurst & Mona, 2017). However, a research gap remains in addressing the practical difficulties associated with implementing translanguaging within specific modules in oral assessment design. This article presents some findings from a personal reflective practice in relation to the opportunities for learning that their experience offers. It aims to highlight how the translanguaging used in the module might offer greater opportunities to learn specific modules in the future. Using Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988), it examines common practices and approaches that were used in implementing oral assessment as an alternative to traditional written examinations. In a later section, a reflection of experiences and lessons learnt by the instructors is discussed, offering reflective insights and practical recommendations. Seeking to investigate whether the outcome of this study is in line with previous studies, three research questions are addressed:

- How did the instructor perceive the oral assessments in evaluating the student's performance?
- How did the students engage with the oral assessment process?
- What were the challenges that were encountered in administering these oral assessments?

Benefits of Oral Exams: Evidence

Scholars have reported on the use of oral assessments in a variety of disciplines, including mathematics, religious studies, business, physics, medicine, and modern languages (Hazen, 2020;

Iannone et al., 2020; Iannone & Vondrová, 2024; Shanmugam et al., 2025). Oral assessments have been defined as

Assessments in which a student's response to the assessment task is verbal, in the sense of being expressed or conveyed by speech instead of writing. Assessment can be rightly considered as oral as long as a component of the student's response is verbal, and that component is being examined. (Joughin, 1998, p. 368)

Oral assessments provide an equitable assessment environment that benefits students from historically marginalised backgrounds because they accommodate diverse learning needs and reduce systemic biases. Oral feedback is a useful technique when used to respond to and correct the students' errors. It is beneficial for students because they can locate and understand their own errors, to analyse and correct in the future (Mahmudah & Anggunsari, 2023). Rani's (2019) study highlighted that oral tests are a fast mode of communication that allows for immediate interaction and response, enables face-to-face conversations, and is adaptable to various situations. Another advantage of oral assessment is that the instructor can provide immediate feedback on points of confusion and give clarity to the question being asked (Esmaeeli & Sadeghi, 2020, p.95). This is especially useful for improvement.

Krautloher (2024), in their article, explored how the use of interactive oral assessments can enhance equity in higher education. The study used the Match, Comprehensible, Challenge, Elicit, and Scaffold (MCCES) framework as an evaluation tool on the effectiveness of oral assessments in accommodating diverse student populations. The results highlighted evidence of improvement in academic outcomes in student retention, reduction of attrition rates, and higher completion rates among underrepresented student groups. In addition, both students and teaching staff had positive experiences because students were able to demonstrate their learning through the assessment method. Thus, the adoption and use of interactive oral assessments can assist educational institutions in closing performance gaps between mainstream and non-traditional students, promoting inclusivity (Krautloher, 2024). In another study, Iannone and Vondrová (2024) investigated the impact of oral assessments in mathematics to determine if they offered any benefits. The study found that oral assessments helped students to gain a deeper conceptual understanding of mathematics, although the students reported that oral exams led to higher anxiety levels. Students also valued oral assessments as opposed to written assessments because the former helped them engage more deeply with the course material. Iannone et al. (2020) also examined how oral performance assessments influenced undergraduate mathematics students' learning. Through the use of oral performance assessments in two third-year mathematics modules, their study found that oral assessments enabled students to acquire a conceptual understanding of the module rather than memorising it for a written exam. This allowed them to get a deeper understanding of the course because they focused on knowing the underlying principles rather than cramming or guessing. That study further found that the interactive nature of oral assessments encouraged students to participate more, creating an environment conducive for deeper engagement.

Thus, oral assessments, despite the challenges, offer a viable alternative to traditional assessment methods, which can improve academic outcomes in higher education. Oral assessments can positively influence students' learning approaches and promote a deeper understanding of a module. However, caution should be given to the issue of stress and anxiety through providing adequate support to students. Another advantage of administering an oral exam is that it provides a more authentic experience. Unlike written assessments, the administration of oral exams lessens the marking workload of the instructor who is left with little to no grading after the exam (Theobald, 2021). Oral exams allow instructors to probe students' understanding, giving them a more complete picture of their understanding (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021).

Hazen (2020) investigated oral assessments and highlighted both their strengths and limitations. One of the advantages of oral examinations they noted is their capacity to promote deeper understanding and critical thinking among the students. They highlighted that oral assessments require students to articulate and defend their ideas in a present set up, which allows them to reveal the extent to which they have understood the theory and their ability to apply it in practice—in other words, to be more analytical and critical in thinking. That study also showed that oral assessments enable students to receive immediate feedback and clarification. In cases where a student misunderstands a question, the examiner can rephrase it, and vice versa for students who can clarify their responses. Oral assessment also has the potential to enhance communication skills and reduce opportunities for plagiarism.

Despite the clear benefits, Hazen (2020) acknowledged that there are several significant challenges to oral assessments. Firstly, they are time-consuming and have logistical issues in terms of scheduling when there are large numbers of students. Furthermore, research reports that students at times are not accustomed to facing their assessor during an assessment, which makes the process daunting and stressful. Additionally, administering oral assessments requires significant time and resources, which is a considerable limitation. Oral assessments also seem to favour articulate students over those with weaker communication skills. The nature of an oral assessment opens itself up to potential bias and subjectivity when grading the students because the marking happens simultaneously with the assessment process (Fenton, 2024). Lastly, studies have revealed that oral assessments provoke anxiety in students and affect those who are introverted or lack confidence in public speaking. This emotional factor hinders performance and compromises the fairness of the evaluation. This means that when implementing oral assessment, one needs to carefully plan its implementation and moderation to avoid the above disadvantages. This can be done through the use of clear rubrics and by training examiners against bias. There is thus a lot of time is required in administration by the instructor to deliver oral exams (Theobald, 2021).

Context

Around 40 per cent of the global population has no access to education in a language they understand, which affects their learning (UNESCO, 2025). This means about 250 million learners worldwide face systemic exclusion due to language barriers. UNESCO (2025) advocated multilingual education and inclusive pedagogies as a means of dealing with this problem and promoting equity. According to the national census (Statistics South Africa, 2023), isiZulu is the most spoken language in the country (24,4%), followed by isiXhosa (16,3%) and Afrikaans (10,6%); only 8,7 per cent of the population speaks English at home, yet it is used as the default language for learning at universities in South Africa. The DUT community is mixed, with students from various socioeconomic backgrounds (Molokwane & Zogli, 2021). DUT's student population is predominantly individuals from lower-income groups and disadvantaged communities with lower English proficiency (Sivanath, 2020). According to Mheta et al. (2018), about 80 per cent of the disadvantaged students at DUT are from deep rural and peri-urban communities of KwaZulu-Natal (comprising 81% African, 1% Coloured, 11% Indian, and 2% White students). Most of the students speak isiZulu, along with other languages, for example, English, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Afrikaans, KiSwahili, ChiShona, and ChiBemba. DUT thus has a multilingual community, which was reflected in the module under study. Given the linguistic profile of DUT's student population, this study focused on the need to adopt a multilingual responsive methodology. This is because equity in assessment methods has been a major topic in research within the higher education sector given that current assessment designs ignore the needs of the diverse student population (Krautloher, 2024). Using the home language as a

resource could address the language competence issues experienced during learning (Nsele et al., 2024), which could bridge the gap and make the playing field equal for all students, despite their backgrounds.

Methods

This qualitative study was designed to reflect on the administration of oral examinations concerning first-year students who were enrolled in the General Education module Law for Life in 2019 at DUT. Reflection is the recollection of events or an experience of a specific event, and helps one to evaluate the situation that occurred; with it comes self-awareness and critical analysis, which can improve insight and practice (Markkanen et al., 2020). Reflective writing is a critical analysis of an experience, recording its impact on the self, and planning the use of the newly gained knowledge (Ahmed, 2024). Professionally, reflective writing captures detailed learning experiences that thoughtfully enhance various perspectives and are important in building knowledge (Sudirman et al., 2024). Gibbs' reflective cycle is a model used as an approach in reflective writing (Sekarwinahyu et al., 2019). According to Ahmadpour et al. (2025, p. 2).

The Gibbs model consists of six stages:

- 1) Description: which involves straightforward narrative writing;
- 2) Feelings: during this stage, the student expresses their feelings and thoughts, essentially sharing their positive or negative emotions regarding the experience;
- 3) Evaluation: In this phase, individuals assess the good or bad aspects of their feelings, thoughts, and actions;
- 4) Analysis: This stage involves exploring the reasons behind the experience and what made it good or bad;
- 5) Conclusion: the individual reflects on what lesson they learned from the experience and what alternative actions they might have taken in that situation;
- 6) Action Plan: in this stage, the individual determines what they would do if they were to find themselves in the same situation again.

These six stages help in elaborating on what was implemented and the challenges thereof. Through using reflective writing as a methodological approach, this article critically engages with the process and impact of oral assessment in the General Education module. This entails descriptions of what happened, the feelings felt, and some conclusions. Reflective writing was chosen because it allowed for the exploration of personal experiences and insights, enabling the writer to examine what occurred, why it occurred, how it was experienced, and what lessons we can learn from it.

Reflective writing has been widely recognised in scholarly literature as a valid and enriching research method. For example, Boud et al. (2013) argued that reflection transforms experience into learning, particularly in professional development contexts. Similarly, Larrivee (2000) contended that reflective practice fosters critical consciousness among educators and brings commonly held beliefs into question. Furthermore, Stephen Brookfield (2017), in their work, argued that reflective writing is a vital tool in professional and educational development because it equips them to understand challenges and transform their teaching. Brookfield further highlighted that reflective writing helps develop critical consciousness, enhances teaching integrity and responsiveness to diverse student needs, builds trust, and justifies using diverse methods in teaching.

Data were collected from the practitioners' reflective journals, educator observations, and anonymised feedback shared voluntarily during and after the assessment process through document analysis. Document analysis is commonly used in qualitative research as a descriptor of the personal beliefs and perceptions of those being researched (Armstrong, 2021; Morgan, 2022), which makes it suitable for this study. Additional data were anonymised from the student evaluation questionnaires (SEQs) and

anonymised final marks statistics. As per the norm of anonymity employed in administering SEQs, the identities of participants remain unknown. The research itself, as a reflective piece, was not dealing with sensitive issues that affect in any way. In accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act, no personal identifiers have been disclosed. The data were used solely to inform reflective pedagogical analysis and were not quoted directly. In cases where encounters with individual students are described, the narrative is presented solely to illustrate pedagogical insight and is not intended as empirical data collection. To enhance credibility and scholarly rigour, triangulation was done through integrating three complementary sources of insight: the author's personal teaching experience, anonymised SEQ feedback and final marks, and relevant academic literature. The practitioners' experience provided a rich context of observations of the oral assessment process. The SEQ data offered application results of the effectiveness of the approach used. These were then critically situated within existing scholarship on translanguaging, oral assessment, and multilingual frameworks in South Africa.

Thematic data analysis was then used to identify patterns and themes emerging from the data. Key themes were extracted and recorded using tabulation and were analysed using a narrative approach. From there, key themes that broadly corresponded with the research aim and questions were sifted and presented. The translanguaging framework thus informed data analysis through the coding. Identified themes such as improved performance through oral assessments, anxiety and stress, and student feedback were identified through their alignment with the theory, ensuring that the analysis was anchored to highlight the multilingual challenges of the student population.

Theoretical Framework

African higher education has transformed its assessment practices by challenging traditional models of learning and adopting inclusive approaches. Central to this shift is the theory of translanguaging, which this study adopts. Translanguaging as a theoretical framework was first articulated by Williams (1994, cited in Jones, 2017) in the context of Welsh bilingual education. It was then reconceptualised by García (2009), Blackledge & Creese (2010), and García and Li (2014) as a critical theory of multilingual practice. It is a theory that goes beyond classroom language practices, shaping learning and teaching (García & Li, 2014; Lin, 2019). The theory helps to rethink how knowledge administration in a multilingual African higher education setting can be enhanced. By integrating that perspective, this study argues that higher education institutions ought to move towards a transformative framework that enables students to use the languages they know during assessments.

Translanguaging is “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (Canagarajah, 2011a, p. 401). Here, the learner and instructor can use a concept in one language, isiZulu, to explain a concept presented in English. The benefits of translanguaging are that it maximises learning (Hornberger, 2005) and boosts learners' confidence and confidence (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). It also balances the power relations among languages in the classroom (Canagarajah, 2011b) and allows for intercultural negotiation by drawing on meanings of concepts in the multilingual classroom (Henricks, 2016). Translanguaging helps to leverage students' diverse language practices when it comes to teaching and learning. Translanguaging aims to “leverage the fluid language of learners in ways that deepen their engagement and comprehension of complex content and texts” (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 2). This means that translanguaging helps bring equality by incorporating assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning in various ways, allowing them to actively participate in the assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). This was what we aimed to do with the oral assessments.

Treffers-Daller (2024) offered a critical examination of translanguaging as a concept. They highlighted that translanguaging lacks accurate diagnostic criterion, which makes it a challenge in

educational settings. There is a need to motivate the students to use this approach given that some students have also viewed the approach as experimental and thus are reluctant to use it (Wlosowicz, 2020). In addition, another challenge of translanguaging is that it requires teachers to understand how to use it. This means there is a need for formal training in using translanguaging, which aligns with existing language policies for both the teachers and students (Deniega & Neri, 2024). This presents itself as a challenge. Ngubane (2025) further noted that providing translations of difficult assessment instructions into students' languages would be time-consuming for the teachers. For students, translanguaging would mean that they could answer the questions using multiple languages, which would present a challenge in scoring (Ngubane, 2025). Several markers from diverse languages may be needed to score the assessments or translate responses into English. This might be costly for universities, and it could be an easy excuse to reject translanguaging in assessments. There is also a chance that translanguaging would be seen as replacing one dominant language with another language (Machimana & Genis, 2024). This must be guarded against.

Module Overview

The DUT Assessment Policy (2019) provides a regulatory framework for all assessments, which extends to practical, written, and oral assessments. Law for Life is an 8-credit module offered by DUT's General Education department. The module aims to make the law relevant to everyday life and to equip students with how the law affects them daily. It aims to develop the following DUT graduate attributes: Critical and creative thinkers who work independently and collaboratively; knowledgeable practitioners; effective communicators; culturally, environmentally, and socially aware within a local and global context and active and reflective learners. (DUT, 2015, p. 2)

The above graduate attributes emphasise the importance of students' conceptual understanding of module content and for this reason, oral assessments were chosen. Currently, the module is offered as a continuous assessment using English, a notion that has been criticised in research (Ngubane, 2025). The diverse large classroom sizes also affect the design and administration of assessments, as highlighted in the course enrolment statistics above. This makes it difficult to craft individualised tasks, especially when there is a need to adapt to address linguistic injustices through translanguaging (Ngubane, 2025). Timely and constructive feedback in translanguaging is also labour-intensive (Vahed et al., 2023). The module's use of continuous assessment is perceived as a loophole. Most students disengage from regular attendance at lectures, which undermines their ability to engage with and understand assessments (Ontong et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a myth among the students that accommodating multilingual learning needs means they can abscond from attending lectures or actively participating therein. Students in the module rely on lecture PowerPoint slides rather than reading prescribed texts and attending lectures and tutorials (Ashikuzzaman, 2025). Participation in tutorials is an important aspect of the module because tutorials directly feed into assessments.

The module had 1,305 students from the faculty of management sciences, servicing students from Business Law, Business Administration, Human Resources Management, Marketing, Operations, Public Relations & Communications Management, Retail Management, Local Government Management, Public Disaster Management, and Supply Chain Management. Most of the students enrolled were Black isiZulu-speakers with very few (about 1%) White, Coloured, and Indian students. With the percentage of enrolments showing that most students are isiZulu speakers, translanguaging becomes a pedagogical imperative in this study (Ngubane, 2025). Using translanguaging would allow the students to learn and access complex academic content through their linguistic rights in education (Ntshangase & Bosch, 2020). This, though, does not disregard the other non-isiZulu-speaking students in the classrooms.

Implementation and Outcomes

The introduction of oral assessments in the module was fraught with both advantages and disadvantages. This section outlines its process of inception and implementation. Initially, the module used written assessments, and this was then modified to include oral assessments and oral presentations. One oral assessment and one written assessment were administered. The oral assessment was premised on the six dimensions of “content, interaction, authenticity, structure, examiners, and orality” (Joughin, 1998, p. 368). The “authenticity” (Ward et al., 2024, p. 932) of the exam looked at “the extent to which assessment replicates the context of professional practice or ‘real life’” (Joughin, 1998, p. 372). The assessment would take the form of questions. For an oral exam, the instructor considers four additional tasks:

Provide students with practice before the exam; decide the time commitment you are willing to make; determine how students should prepare for the exam and resolve how the exams will be scored and what feedback students will be given. (Theobald, 2021, p. 157)

This section thus underscores the multifaceted planning required to implement oral assessments. Further details are discussed in the sections that follow.

Marking and Examination Procedure

Marks were awarded for the oral exams according to the criteria mentioned in the marking rubric (see Annexure 1). The marks were to assess the level of knowledge and understanding of the learners via a language they preferred for the oral exam. The student would get marks based on this information. Where a student failed to give a correct answer, no mark would be allocated to them. Where the information given was not accurate, the student would fall within a certain margin. The instruction was that discretion would be used by the examiner in mark allocation such that, where possible, a student could be scored 0.5 as a mark. The exam consisted of 10 questions. We did not set strict rules on asking any particular question.

The process began with planning sessions where the students were grouped and allocated to a tutorial group. In the beginning, we had limitations on physical space because the department office lacked dedicated assessment space, and the boardroom could only accommodate a limited number of people. As a result, oral assessments had to be conducted in small-group sessions, which created scheduling constraints and increased administrative workload because of the number undergoing the tests. Students were notified of their allocated time slots and oral assessment schedule via institutional email. Although this system appeared orderly on paper, it assumed students had regular access to email, which was often not the case. We thus also had to adapt the time slots from rigid to flexible slots. This highlighted the fact that administering oral assessments needs flexibility if it is to be successful.

The tutors were a vital resource in this process. They communicated the scope of the oral assessments during tutorial sessions, encouraging students to engage with them before assessment day and to read in advance as they prepared. They also disseminated the scoring rubric before the exam week. Further, they facilitated tutorial sessions where the scoring rubric and oral exam expectations were discussed. This would prepare the students to articulate the central concepts of each question and to understand how they would be graded. Research supports the value of in-class preparatory discussions, detailed rubric, and an assessment brief that has guidelines (Ward et al., 2024, p. 935). Each session lasted approximately 30–40 minutes, and was conducted before a two-member panel because prolonged time could increase stress and negatively affect performance. The 10 minutes were extra minutes to cater for the feedback session and the overlap that occurred between ending one session to the next. These minutes were allocated considering the numbers we were dealing with.

A rubric was designed to guide scoring, which would be ticked off in real time as students answered the questions. This method helped to bring transparency, moderation, and allowed immediate feedback to be given to the student. There was a need to design a rubric that would be used to guide the marking process. A rubric is important because it identifies and outlines important features of a body of knowledge and provides a means to measure them (Furman, 2024). It helps in bringing students and instructors to a shared meaning. Our rubric was done in such a manner that it would not be binary in nature. To achieve this, we used Popham's (1997) scoring strategy that has three essential features:

1. Evaluative criteria: The essential attributes of the assessment to be measured.
2. Quality criteria: The evaluative criteria at different levels of achievement and quality.
3. Scoring criteria: The strategy to produce a grade/score.

For the assessment criteria, we were concerned with the students' ability to show their understanding of the content of the module. Each question thus carried varying marks depending on the extent of information that was required from the answer, as shown by the score range (see Annexure 2). The scoring criteria were liberal to help cater for those who might show partial understanding of the question, so that even when their response did not meet the full marks threshold, they would still earn marks (Furman, 2024). We also made use of isiZulu-speaking tutors who would translate the questions and responses from English to isiZulu for those students who needed clarity. This aligned with literature that agrees that there is value in using African languages to teach and learning (Nsele et al., 2024).

The students waited for the exam based on the time they were allocated. When their turn came, they were called in and welcomed by the panel members. Thereafter rules of engagement were shared, followed by asking the questions. The panel members privately noted down the respective marks for all the questions. After the exam, the student left the room to allow for moderation by the panel. The panel discussed their allocation, queries, and comments, and finalised the mark the student would receive. Open discussion and exchange of opinions formed the moderation process. This ensured that the assessment was done in a consistent, accurate, unbiased, and well-designed manner. The student was then invited back into the room and given their score.

Reflections

I can affirm that the oral exams were successful for a variety of reasons! Firstly, after the exam was finished, a large percentage of students revealed that the exams were not as difficult as they had imagined. I will narrate the story of one student whom I will call XY.

XY was a young undergraduate girl who had great difficulty speaking in English. In this case, it should be known that the description of the student referred to as XY is a narrative presented solely to illustrate the reflective practice framework, where the educator critically engages with the lived exam room experiences to inform translanguaging assessment design in the oral exam. When XY took her seat to have the oral assessment, we realised that she needed the help of an interpreter who would help break down the questions for her as well as translate her interpretation of the question. After we used this technique, we took an extra 15 minutes to complete the session with her. This further speaks to the need to be flexible when administering oral exams. After the assessment, she went out and waited. XY's feedback highlighted that she was grateful for being accommodated when she did the oral exam.

Such comments were confirmations of the success of the assessment. There was a general appreciation of the process, especially the turnaround time for marks. This supports findings in another study by Kang et al. (2019), which highlighted that 91 per cent of the participants preferred the oral format, which allowed them to receive their marks from the teaching assistants immediately after the exam.

Secondly, the university has always administered end-of-year SEQs that asked students to answer in two questions: "What did you like most about this subject?" and "What would you like to see improved

in this subject? The anonymous feedback is compiled and sent back with coding for the module: red symbolises unsatisfactory, whilst orange symbolises a need for improvement, and green symbolises satisfactory. Attached will be a list of comments on the assessments by the students. The data from these SEQs revealed a recurring theme that many students appreciated the oral examination. For some, they appreciated the fact that the oral assessments enabled them to be probed on their understanding and on what they meant by their response. A study by Erling et al. (2017) shared the same sentiments, finding that promoting the use of bilingual classroom strategies among students was favourable and elevated the quality of education. Such appreciation of oral assessments by the students suggests that translanguaging allows them deeper comprehension and more equitable participation in assessments. Consequently, there is a need to rethink assessment design in oral exams as a useful, transformative pedagogical tool.

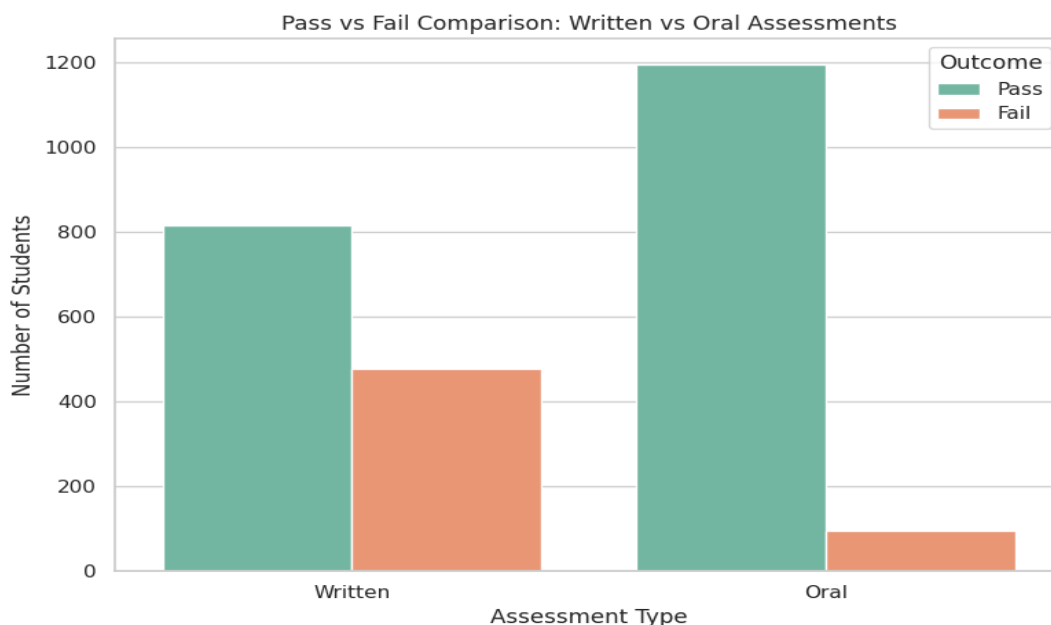
Lessons Learnt

Improved Performance Through Oral Assessments

The final exam spreadsheet gave us the final marks for the module, and it showed a big contrast between the written and oral assessments. About 816 students passed the written assessment, and a significant number of students passed the oral assessment, as shown in Figure 1. This difference shows us that assessment format significantly impacts student success. Failure of the module was more pronounced in the written assessment as opposed to the oral test. Crucially, about 51 of the students who scored zero had not attended a single lecture and tutorial, which speaks to the challenge of attendance and participation as mentioned in the sections above.

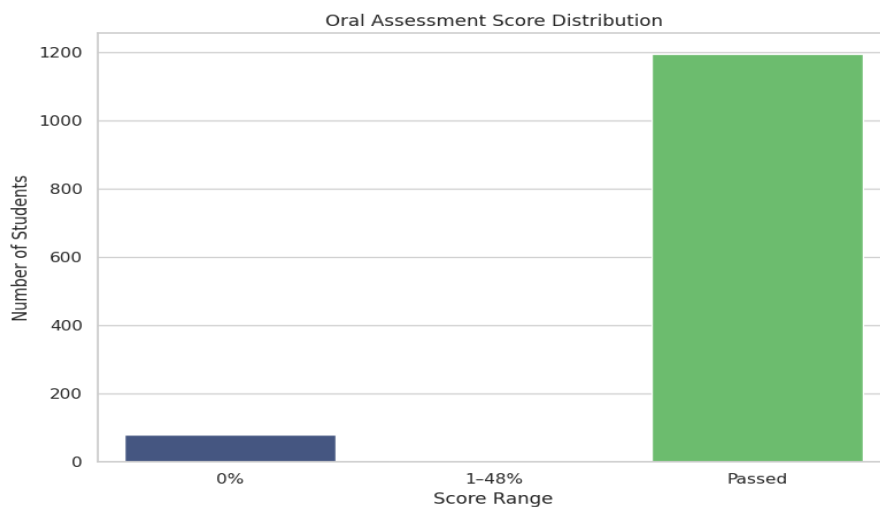
Figure 1

Comparison of Oral vs Written Assessments



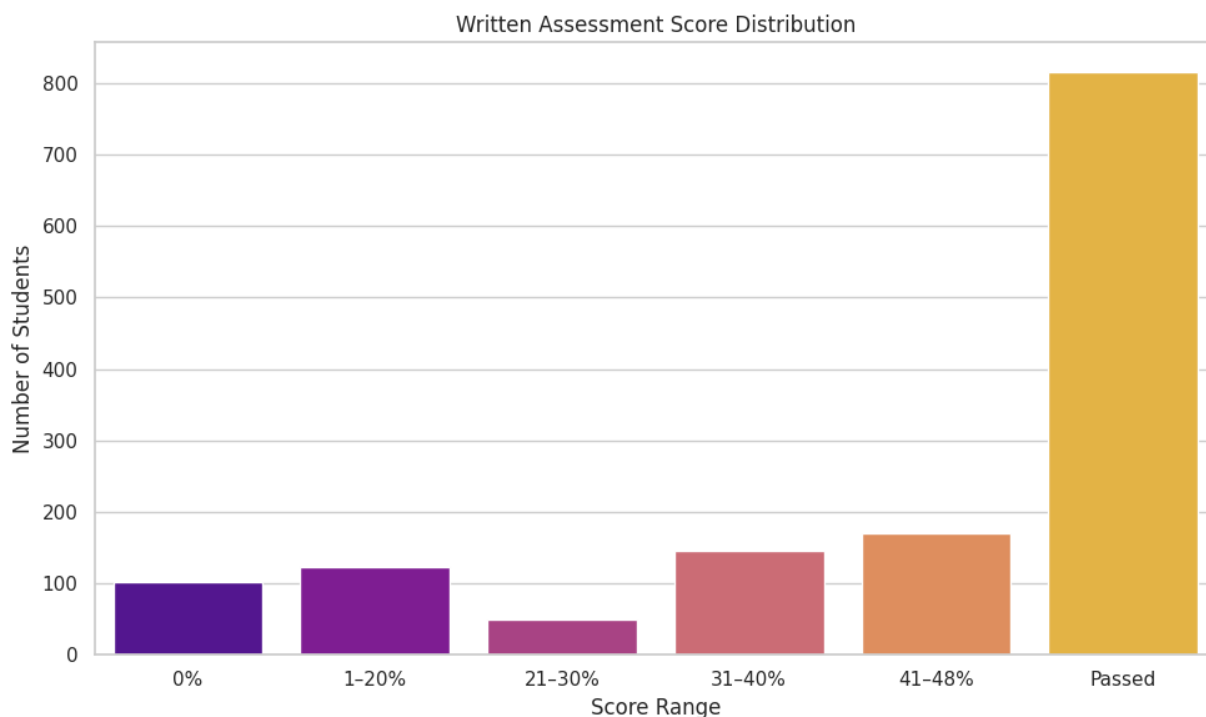
The oral assessment had a lower percentage of students who had a zero (see Figures 2 & 3), which might suggest that its interactive nature has the potential to encourage students to engage more meaningfully than they can in a written assessment. This difference is a significant indication of the impact of oral exams.

Figure 2
Oral Assessment Score



Additionally, the written assessments revealed significant clustering in the lower performance bands (Figure 3), suggesting that many of the students struggled to meet or narrowly missed the pass threshold. This pattern points to and reflects difficulties with interpreting questions, language proficiency issues, or challenges with structuring written responses, which are factors commonly cited in literature on the state of South Africa's multilingual educational landscape (Banda, 2017; Magaba, 2023). In contrast, the oral assessments (Figure 2) had more people who passed over the 50% threshold. One can conclude that this disparity in marks reflects a pedagogical and linguistic dynamic that can be interpreted through translanguaging theory. From this perspective, the high oral pass rate is suggestive of the fact that students can draw from their home languages when answering assessment questions. They do so without being constrained by the use of English as a mode of communication or in writing the assessments. The large cluster of written marks falling below 48% attests to this. The oral exam marks had a lower failure rate, which may indicate that when oral assessments are used, any language speaker becomes empowered to engage. This lends support to the argument that oral assessments may offer a more inclusive and authentic means of evaluating student understanding.

Figure 3
Written Assessment Score



Resourcing Equity in Multilingual Education

The personnel and resources required for oral assessments are substantial. As I reflect, I remember that the times of oral assessments were busy and time-consuming. They required mental and emotional preparation as well as organisation. Preparing for the oral assessment was easy, but the process of completing this was time-consuming. My colleagues and I had to be emotionally prepared to assist all students within the stipulated time, which sometimes meant we had to work more hours than we would normally have. There is a need for budgets that can cater to the hiring, on a full or part-time basis of tutors to assist with administering oral assessments. As mentioned previously, tutors are an important resource in oral assessments, especially as interpreters. The process is time-consuming, and if not handled well, you can encounter difficulties in coordination and timing (Kang et al., 2019) and create a backlog.

I also observed that oral assessments offered a challenge when it came to the moderation of marks. Although the panel discussed and moderated, it did need more time. The 10 minutes allocated was, at times, too little. A study by Beutel et al. (2017, p. 10) also found that oral presentations posed a difficulty in safeguarding “consistent assessment standards” and moderation. These needed measures such as team observations of the presentation or a recording of it with a group rewatch of the recording after the presentation. Moderation of marks is an important element of quality assurance processes in institutions (Morris, 2020). The question is how to ensure that it takes place when you have done oral examinations. Should it be done after the exam, or some days afterwards? This was another huddle we had to deal with after the finalisation of the oral assessment marks. In our case, we had to ensure that we adopted a consensus-seeking approach (van Tonder, 2015). To do this, we had to record the sessions, we used clear and transparent rubrics, and we ensured that two or more assessors were present during the assessment session. The use of technological apps such as MS Teams helped because we were able to record and transcribe the content of the oral exam as it progressed (Siddique et al., 2022).

One resource we found useful was the use of WhatsApp as a medium of communication to circulate assessment dates lists and general information. Some students did not have laptops, and if they left campus to go to their off-campus residences, they did not have access to emails. Social media platforms were a faster source of information diffusion than university emails to keep them up to date. Recent research supports this, highlighting that a “institutions generally choose an ‘informational’ versus a ‘conversational’ communication approach, which means that they mostly prefer to share informative posts on social media” (Galioto et al., 2025, p. 4). WhatsApp platforms thus helped us to connect with all students. However, we still had a challenge, especially with those repeating the module because they thought the module would have written assessments as in previous years. Because they were on a different timetable rotation, they were not in the same social groups because they rarely attended tutorials and lectures. Many missed their allocated slots, and we had to reschedule their oral exams. Another effective resource was working hand-in-hand with the class representatives, who passed information on to students. This ensured that we were able to reach the majority of the students and they were, in some way, informed throughout the process leading up to the oral exam day. I acknowledge that research exists that is of the view that class representatives exploit other students and might thus not be an effective resource to use (Afitska & Heaton, 2019). However, I disagree with this notion and accept Nyoni & Sharma’s (2024) finding. For them, involving class representatives was an opportunity that helped implement targeted interventions for the oral exam.

From a translanguaging perspective, the findings emphasise the need for resources as a structural and implementation necessity if it is to succeed in the sphere of oral assessments. To succeed, oral assessment requires personnel (people well-versed in multiple languages), strong moderation instruments, and the use of technological aids for them to be successful. With the rise of digital technology, we argue that it could be used as a potential platform that goes beyond being a transcription aid, but a platform to host oral exams. This would require devising an “efficient way of delivering and scoring tests,” online to succeed (Nakatsuhara & Berry, 2021, p. 343).

Negotiating Boundaries in Oral Evaluation Contexts

Some of the students who came to the oral exams, despite our willingness to help them, still could not make the passing mark. They had not prepared, they had not read, and had not attended any tutorial; however, they hoped by some magic, they would come to the oral session and just pass because they had shown up. So, what I learnt through that process was that as an instructor, you need to be on guard so that you test the knowledge and not go beyond this threshold. With oral assessments, there appears to be a fine dividing line between assessing knowledge, hinting at the answer to the student, and how far you can go in helping them to answer the questions. Despite being a more advantageous option, oral assessments require that students still spend the same amount of time studying for the exam as they would for a written one (Kang et al., 2019). This is something I found that some students were not aware of: the need to read and prepare. Oral assessment takes a different format, but it still requires input in study. From a translanguaging view, to pass, one still requires cognitive preparation and engagement through reading and attendance. This aligns with Machimana & Genis (2024), who argued that translanguaging is a strategic tool for learning that requires student preparation. It is not a spontaneous act where one shows up unprepared.

Understanding Student Anxiety in Oral Assessment

For most of the students in our module, it was their first time encountering an oral exam during their education. Many of them lacked exposure to oral assessments, and this caused a great deal of anxiety when they realised that this was required of them. I remember one student who, when it was their turn to do the assessment, could not go straight into the questions. We had to do an icebreaker to help the

students calm down. All sorts of anxiety and distress were seen. Some students I observed would sweat profusely, and others would stutter. We also had to learn the hard way that our countenances had to be favourable to give a welcoming and accommodating atmosphere to the students. This was not feasible at all times given that the panel also would be fatigued from sitting for long periods of time. Kang et al. (2019) also found when conducting their preliminary study of oral examinations, that although oral assessments had benefits for students, a key feature was the heightened anxiety the students experienced. This is further supported by those who stated that in their study during the oral exam, the levels of stress responses were greater (Ringeisen et al., 2019). When administered properly, translanguaging must be paired with safeguards that potentially reduce learner anxiety and fear, creating safe and free spaces. However, to get to this place, there must be an intentional design of support for the practice, such as what we see in Tebid (2019). They showed that it is possible to have a translanguaging context where students do not experience fear and anxiety in learning.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

This article is a reflective piece that offers insight into administering oral assessments through translanguaging, highlighting its potential to support multilingual students. Translanguaging was used as a theoretical framework and motivation for revealing how monolingual assessment practices are unfair and biased. However, this study is grounded in a single researcher's reflective perspective. This limits generalisability of the findings. Expanding the study to include other instructors, academics, and students could be of benefit to bring more comprehensive contextual insights. Similarly, the study could further be expanded to other modules within DUT and South African higher education institutions at large, offering a national perspective.

In essence, we find that translanguaging in oral assessments accommodates multilingual students who can use their existing linguistic resources to show the depth of their knowledge. Although oral exams are potentially more time-intensive than a written exam, they are effective and afford students from different backgrounds equal opportunities to showcase what they have learnt. Furthermore, we believe oral exams can increase student self-efficacy and assist those from non-English-speaking homes. To succeed, however, there is a need to invest in resources such as recorders, interpreters, and more staff to reduce the workload. Social media platforms are a useful resource for information dissemination as well as class representatives. The marked differences as highlighted above point to the fact that if oral assessments are used constantly, they can increase the pass rate of any particular module. With undeniable evidence of high stress and anxiety levels, those who wish to administer oral exams need to invest in having frequent, informal oral activities during tutorial sessions throughout the course, which will prepare the students. This could reduce fear and build confidence. Intense pre-assessment preparation tutorials are a necessity because they help equip the students with oral exam techniques and communication skills. From working with a large number of students, it is recommended that oral assessments are best suited for smaller groups, which significantly reduces the workload. Lastly, if one decides to embark on oral exams, it is possible and viable to address equality in higher education, but one must be ready to invest the time and planning as required.

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Annexure 1: Rubric

CRITERION	The answer showed a sophisticated understanding of the union of theoretical and thematic material	The answer showed a clear engagement with theory in explaining the issues involved	The answer showed some knowledge of the topic, but little understanding of the issues involved	The answer illustrated little knowledge* or understanding of the topic	No answer /Answer incorrect
Question 1	8	7-5	4-3	2-1	0
Question 2	2	1.5	1	0.5	0
Question 3	5	4-3	3-2	1.5 -1	0
Question 4	3	2-2.5	2	1	0
Question 5		Grade as question 3			
Question 6		Grade as question 2			
Question 7		Grade as question 4			
Question 8	6	5-4	3-2	1.5-1	0
Question 9		Grade as question 4			
Question 10		Grade as question 4			

TOTAL – INDIVIDUAL ORAL: 40

Instruction: You can revise your marking rubric or assessment guidelines to explicitly allow for half-mark allocations where appropriate.

Annexure 2

LWLF INDIVIDUAL ORAL Questions

1. QUESTION 1 (8 MARKS)

Jack and Caroline have been in a relationship for 5 years and are expecting their firstborn on the 14th of February. One week prior to the due date, the couple was involved in a deadly accident, and as a result, they were transferred to St. Augustine Hospital. Caroline was unconscious and living on life support, and Jack had only a broken leg and neck. Because of the high shock that Caroline and the baby had during the accident, the doctors had to decide whether they should abort the baby to save the mother or save the baby instead of the mother. After inquiring about Jack, they decided to save Caroline since he loved her, and he believed that she would be fine after a few weeks. After saving Caroline, the doctor realised that Caroline would remain unconscious and on life support for the rest of her life, which gave them a choice of either unplugging the machines that kept her alive or letting her live, and they must report to the family. After reporting the news to Jack, who was still in the emergency room, he kept quiet for a couple of minutes, took weed (marijuana) out of his pocket and lit it in the emergency room, and started smoking. As he was smoking, the smoke detector went on, and he was arrested, he went to court and received a death penalty sentence law because he could have burnt the entire hospital down since many rooms of the hospital, including emergency rooms are using gas.

Based on the scenario above, which following topics apply? Support your answer with relevant legislation and court cases, you know. Your answer can also give a critical analysis of the role of morals, ethics, and religion.

2. What is the role of courts in legal matters? (2)
3. What is the function of the Supreme Court of Appeal? (5)
4. Laws are there to make sure there is order in society. Is this true or false? Justify. (3)
5. What makes a law just? (5)
6. Briefly explain what *stare decisis* means. (2)
7. The Constitution of South Africa is higher than any other law in the country. Explain what this means. (3)
8. Name any 2 rights that are in the Constitution that protect the political rights of South African citizens. Explain why you think the ones you have chosen are important. (6)
9. You have just employed Julius at your company. Julius is HIV positive. He is regularly ill and can no longer perform the work you employed him to do. Explain whether you can dismiss him. (3)
10. What are the laws that are against unfair dismissal of people with HIV and AIDS in South Africa? (3)

THE END!!!!

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Parents' and Teachers' Views on the Use of Mother Tongue for Learning and Teaching in a Quintile 1 Primary School²

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Abstract

This paper reports the parents' and teachers' views on the use of mother tongue for learning and teaching in a Quintile 1 primary school in Gauteng, South Africa. Current research indicates that parents generally prefer English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) for their children's primary education. However, there is paucity of research on how parents and teachers in Quintile 1 schools view and perceive the use of mother tongue for teaching and learning in the early stages of their children's education. In this study, a qualitative approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with ten parents and ten teachers. Some South African language policies were also consulted to ascertain if the stakeholders understood them. Findings from the interviews with the parents indicated that even though parents were aware of the benefits of using a mother tongue for teaching and learning, there was preference for English as LOLT. In respect to language policies, while teachers understood the implications of the prescribed language policies for schools, parents seemed to be unsure about these. Future research should focus on how best the school governing bodies and teachers could expose parents to information regarding the benefits of existing language-related policies.

Keywords: glocalisation, language policy, mother tongue learning, Quintile 1 schools

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Introduction

In South Africa as well as elsewhere in the world, teaching learners in mother tongue or vernacular languages remains topical and highly contested. This topicality and contestation may be due to various reasons like colonisation, politics, globalisation, and migration to name a few. These factors have had implications for policies and practices relating to language learning and teaching in different contexts. On the issue of language and globalisation, Quan et al. (2024, p. 267) opined that the hegemony of use of the English language in education in South Africa, and indeed in most African countries, is entrenched by several factors such as colonial legacies (within the Anglophone countries), globalisation, and access to the global marketplace because English proficiency is considered “cultural capital” instrumental for “social integration and upward mobility.” It is arguable that globalisation could also be the main driver in parents’ choice of languages of instruction for their children. This is reflected in Phindane (2015), who investigated parental perceptions in the Eastern Cape and found that parents preferred English as a language of learning for their children’s Foundation Phase education. Webb (1999) also pointed out that over time, there has been a shift in the attitudes of parents towards mother tongue as a language of learning in education.

There seem to be different views about mother-tongue education in South African primary, secondary, and tertiary education. While one view proffers an optimistic perception of mother tongue instruction as a saviour for addressing learners’ poor academic performance, the pessimists see mother tongue as sounding the death knell for quality education (Magocha et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Nyarigoti & Ambiyi (2014) on the mother tongue instruction situation in Kenya, the parents who participated in the interviews expressed that, if students wish to succeed academically, they must speak and be proficient in English. Conversely, Tizza et al. (2016) opined that when mother tongue is implemented as the medium in primary instruction, the learner ends up being a better thinker and better learner in both first and second language. These researchers further noted that teachers realised that parents, along with the other stakeholders, play a significant role in the implementation of mother tongue instruction. In the South African context, policies like The South African Schools Act of (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill (Republic of South Africa, 2021), which was signed into law in 2024, consider parents to be key role players in the determination of the school’s language of learning and teaching (LoLT). According to van der Walt & Oosthuizen (2021), BELA brought two key aspects of schooling to the surface: the right of parents to determine the type of schooling that their children should enjoy, and the question of whether the concept of state schools can be justified. Additionally, BELA provided for a provincial Head of Department to compel a public school to change its language policy and to adopt more than one LoLT (van der Walt & Oosthuizen, 2021). Against the backdrop of these two policies, in this paper, we would like to understand how parents and teachers in a Quintile 1 primary school view mother tongue as LoLT. This study fills the gap involving contestations around the use of mother tongue instruction, particularly in less advantaged primary schools.

When looking at the situation of the parents who are regarded as having a voice in determining the language situation in the schools, and the educators who are viewed as custodians of the curriculum, it was crucial to establish how the language preferences of these stakeholders have influence at the primary school where the research was conducted. The context of the research site was a Quintile 1 public school in a township in Pretoria, South Africa. All public schools in South Africa are divided into five quintiles following the recommendations of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), using indicators such as total household income, literacy levels, and unemployment rates of a community to calculate a school's quintile ranking. Schools that fall under the first three quintiles are “no fee paying” schools whilst “fee paying” schools fall under Quintiles 4 and 5 respectively. The primary school used for this research is a Quintile 1 public school, which denotes that the surrounding community is faced with challenges related to low-income levels, low literacy, and low employment rates. We considered it would be useful to understand how the parents and teachers from this community perceive the use of languages use in relation to globalisation.

Literature Review

South Africa's Linguistic Ecology

The historical linguistic backdrop of South Africa is characterised by a complex interplay of colonial powers, Indigenous opposition, and apartheid legislation. Scholars such as Alexander (2000) and Heugh (2009) argued that language laws and policies have historically entrenched linguistic hierarchies, with English and Afrikaans privileged at the expense of African languages. The democratic transition in 1994 marked a significant shift, with the promulgation of policies geared towards righting historical wrongs and promoting linguistic variety. The enactment of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996, recognises and encourages learning in 11 official languages, with the recent addition of South African sign language as the 12th official language (Republic of South Africa, 2024), reflecting the vast linguistic varieties of South Africa. Furthermore, the language in education policy (LiEP; DoE, 1997) advocated the use of these languages in schools as media of instruction. Lastly, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the national curriculum that is used in schools was also introduced by the DBE (2012). CAPS aims at addressing historical disparities in education and ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities, including language education. It acknowledges the cognitive significance of home languages and advocates for their use in learning and teaching where feasible. Yet, as Kamwangamalu (2016) noted, despite progressive legislation, structural inequalities and societal attitudes continue to sustain English dominance in most educational domains.

Learning in a Mother Tongue

Research across Africa consistently demonstrates the benefits of mother tongue-based education. Cummins (2000) and Heugh (2013) emphasised that home language instruction enhances cognitive development, literacy acquisition, and higher-order thinking skills. In the South African context, scholars such as Desai (2016) and Probyn (2006) showed that learners taught in their mother tongue in early schooling exhibit stronger conceptual understanding and improved academic performance in later years. Beyond cognitive advantages, mother-tongue education strengthens cultural identity and fosters a sense of belonging (Nishanthi, 2020). Conversely, neglecting home languages may lead to alienation and poorer educational outcomes (Wadesango et al., 2015). These findings form the basis for this paper's central argument, which points out that promoting mother tongue use in schools is not merely a matter of cultural preservation, but of educational equity and academic success. It is recommended that the learner's mother tongue should be used for learning and teaching wherever possible (DoE, 1997). This is particularly important in the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) where children learn to read and write, and make a transition from their mother tongue to an additional language (DBE, 2013).

However, the use of South African vernacular languages is still largely discouraged in many South African schools through schools' language policy implementation activities (Probyn, 2006), which still greatly favour English. One of the reasons for this marginalisation may be that parents in South Africa are gravitating towards the opinion that their children should be taught in English. Research has shown that many parents in South Africa associate English with ascent and global opportunities, resulting in resistance to mother tongue instruction (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). Teachers, too, may feel constrained by limited resources, lack of training, and perceptions of African languages as academically inadequate (Probyn, 2006). Therefore, the views, attitudes, and perceptions of parents and teachers toward mother-tongue education are frequently confounded by this linguistic dynamic, the effects of globalisation, and urbanisation. The movement of parents in and out of cities results in the interconnection of languages, political, cultural, and economic activities. Languages such as English function as common lingua francas across linguistically diverse communities in South Africa, often dominating African languages in many domains, even though these African languages are spoken by the majority of South Africans. According to research by Safitri & Tari (2025) and Mwelil (2019), parents and teachers are frequently identified as the primary influencers impacting the language learning environment. For example, in the South African context, parents may push for their children to be educated in English, even when research shows that learners benefit cognitively and academically from mother tongue instruction (Desai, 2016; Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). A parent might, for example, deliberately choose an English-medium school over a local isiXhosa-medium one because of the belief that English ensures access to higher education and

employment opportunities. Similarly, a teacher may avoid using isiZulu in class, even if all the learners speak it at home, reinforcing English dominance and undermining the policy intention of the language in education Policy (DoE, 1997). Thus, children's learning and subsequent academic performance are significantly impacted by these stakeholders' attitudes toward home mother tongue learning and language in education policies.

Stakeholders' awareness of the function of mother-tongue languages in schools is a critical component of their attitudes. Alexander (2000) noted that cognitive, cultural, and socio-political purposes are served by language in education and by mother tongue instruction. This is supported by Areo (2019), who emphasised that greater conceptual understanding and higher order thinking abilities are among the cognitive advantages of mother tongue instruction. The use of vernacular languages in the classroom can further enhance students' sense of self-worth and sociocultural belonging given that language is such an important part of cultural identity. Studies have shown that affirming learners' mother tongue fosters stronger self-esteem and academic engagement (Cummins, 2000; Probyn, 2009; Brock-Utne, 2007). As language impacts social interactions and access to possibilities, the socio-political component of language in education is particularly significant. However, as Wadesango et al. (2015) noted, it is possible that parents and teachers do not fully comprehend these positive attributes of language, which results in their preference for some languages over others.

The Selection of a LoLT in Schools

According to Kamwangamalu (2000) and Brock-Utne (2007), the predominant factors that influence language selection are economically and socially related. For example, languages that are viewed as more economically beneficial or socially prestigious may be preferred by parents and teachers. On this issue, Halimi et al. (2020) and Heugh (2013) agree that such preferences may influence a child's motivation, academic success, and the formation of their sociocultural identities. As Taylor & von Fintel (2016, p. 77) noted, "English is widely perceived to be the language of upward mobility, and this leads to a preference for instruction in English from as early as possible." However, this is ironic given that contrasting evidence in many language studies such as Desai (2016) showed that there is a small number of pupils from township schools who write adeptly by the time they complete their school careers.

In addition, learners struggle to grasp concepts in other subjects taught in English because they find it difficult to read with comprehension (Robertson and Graven, 2020). This was confirmed by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2021 (DBE, 2023) results, which showed that learners' reading performance deteriorates as they progress to higher grades. The Annual National Assessment of numeracy and literacy of learners from Grades 3 to 9 has also shown that learners' literacy levels in South Africa have declined instead of improving since the implementation of Curriculum 2005 (DBE, 2013). For example, South African Grade 6 learners performed below the mean in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ, 2011), when compared to learners in the same age groups in other countries

Conceptual Framework

Based on the aim of this paper to explore parents' and teachers' views on the use of mother tongue for learning and teaching in a Quintile 1 school in Gauteng, the concept of *glocalisation* is a fitting anchor to help contextualise their views within the thinking about local languages and the broader global space. Several researchers with an interest in glocalisation (e.g. Robertson, 2021; Roudometof, 2016) understand it as the adaptation of global phenomena to local contexts, resulting in unique, localised expressions. In similar vein, Tryzna (2023) regarded glocalisation as a linguistic blend of "globalisation" and "localisation." The term denotes the principle of "think globally, act locally" (Qenai & Wright, 2025, p. 23). Essentially, it signifies the interconnectedness of global and local domains and the correlation between local occurrences and global occurrences. Other researchers regard glocalisation as a significant educational method for equipping and instructing students to become global citizens (Pacho, 2020). However, glocalisation in education focuses on recognising that education is not limited to a single national or cultural context but should be tailored to the unique needs of different communities (Hocutt & Brown, 2018).

The picture of glocal classrooms painted by Qenai & Wright (2025) is that which is characterised by cultural diversity, the inclusion of local, cultural traditions and values, and the consideration of the personal, social, and historical experiences of those involved. This characterisation has relevance for the school under study considering its geographical location and social background. Furthermore, this school community may share diverse individual and group goals and interests that are legitimate in glocalised teaching and learning, thus allowing for different interpretations of the common good. The common good in this case may include, among others, raising awareness of local ecological issues, the need to teach children their heritage language, or the use of local epistemologies when teaching how to work with learners with their specific educational needs. In the view of Wright (2025), glocalisation should be culturally relevant and balanced between global and local considerations, ultimately aiming to create a culturally relevant educational experience for students. She further shared the following principles of glocalisation:

- Glocalisation should be culturally relevant and balanced between global and local considerations, ultimately aiming to create a culturally relevant educational experience for students.
- Glocalisation requires contextual adaptation. Effective language learning goes beyond the mere transmission of linguistic knowledge; it involves fostering meaningful engagement and connections with the target language and culture.
- Glocalisation includes language variations and the use of all semiotic resources for developing language proficiency. Thus, it requires recognition and acceptance of language variations, including the incorporation of students' native languages through code-switching and translanguaging practices. (Wright, 2025, p. 9)

We selected to underpin this study on the concept of glocalisation to explore the views of the parents and teachers on the perceived opportunities of using mother tongue as LoLT. This is in line with many studies that have highlighted the benefits of teaching learners in the mother tongue (Quan et al., 2024; Sahin, 2018).

Research Methods

The key focus of this paper was to explore the parents' and teachers' views on the use of mother tongue for learning and teaching in a Quintile 1 primary school. The research sought to answer the following question: "What are parents' and teachers' views on using mother tongue as LoLT in a Quintile 1 primary school?"

The study used a qualitative explanatory design to investigate an existing topic with the aim of providing a better understanding of the phenomenon (Swedburg, 2020). This research approach was preferred because the researchers sought to understand "why" parents and teachers preferred certain languages to be used for teaching and learning. By reviewing the literature and conducting in-person interviews with parents and teachers, the researchers intended to delve deeper into the dimensions of the research problem to understand "why things are the way they are" regarding mother tongue learning in education.

This paper is part of a master's degree obtained at the University of South Africa. To that end, an ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the University and written consent was also obtained from the DBE, the school principal, and the school governing body. An application letter was sent to the district director and the school principal requesting permission to conduct research at the specific school. A face-to-face meeting was conducted with the principal of the school to explain the nature of the study. Upon approval, the school was contacted and the arrangement of dates and assistance with sampling were discussed. A letter was sent to the selected parents and teachers to inform them of the intended research. The researcher informed these participants about the aims of the study, the nature of the study, the possible risks involved throughout the study, and research participants' right to opt out of the study. It was imperative for the research participants to be sufficiently informed about the research because this

strengthened trust and confidence throughout the process. Thereafter, participants signed a consent form prior to the interviews. The participants were reassured that their responses would be kept confidential, and that anonymity would be maintained throughout the study. They were also assured that their responses would not be traced back to them.

For trustworthiness, a thick description of how data were collected was provided. Stahl and King (2020, p. 26) describe these thick descriptions as “texts so rich in details that the event or the object of description is palpable.” For example, the study employed two techniques to increase the credibility of the results. Firstly, triangulation through a combination of different sources such as the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996), Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997), CAPS (DBE, 2012), the BELA bill (Republic of South Africa, 2021), and interviews with participants were used to strengthen credibility. Secondly, member checking was employed by going back to the participants and confirming whether the findings had been accurately captured.

The study used the purposeful sampling technique to choose participants. Ten parents (comprising three men and seven women) and 10 teachers (two men and eight women) participated in semi-structured interviews. This gender classification may be consistent with the situation in primary schools where there are usually more female compared to male teachers. For example, a study by McGrath & Sinclair (2013), which has highlighted the need for more male primary school teachers. Furthermore, the participants were purposefully selected because they were directly involved as stakeholders in the school either as parents or teachers of the learners in this primary school. One-on-one interviews with both teachers and parents were also conducted at the school, outside of teaching time to avoid disrupting the teaching and learning schedule. Participants’ profiles appear in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1
Parents’ Profiles (n = 10)

Respondents’ Labels	Gender	Age Range	Mother Tongue
Pm1	Male	>45	isiZulu
Pm2	Male	35–44	SeTswana
Pm3	Male	25–34	Northern Sotho
Pf1	Female	>45	Northern Sotho
Pf2	Female	35–44	English
Pf3	Female	35–44	chiShona
Pf4	Female	35–44	Tshivenda
Pf5	Female	25–34	Northern Sotho
Pf6	Female	25–34	Xitsonga
Pf7	Female	25–34	Xitsonga

Table 2
Teachers' Profiles (n = 10)

Respondents' Labels	Gender	Age Range	Mother Tongue
Tm1	Male	>45	Northern Sotho
Tm2	Male	>25–34	isiZulu
Tf1	Female	>45	Northern Sotho
Tf2	Female	>45	Setswana
Tf3	Female	>45	Xitsonga
Tf4	Female	>45	isiZulu
Tf5	Female	>35–44	Northern Sotho
Tf6	Female	>35–44	isiZulu
Tf7	Female	>25–34	Xitsonga
Tf8	Female	>18–24	Northern Sotho

Data Analysis

In this research, thematic analysis was used to manage and interpret the data. Thematic analysis is a technique for analysing qualitative data in which the researcher carefully analyses the data to find recurring themes, topics, notions, and patterns of meaning (Caulfield, 2022). The researchers analysed the data in this study using the five steps proposed by Friedman (2012, p. 191); while there are several ways to go about thematic analysis, the most popular method involves these steps as indicated below:

1. Thinking about how data relates to the research purpose.
2. Categorising the data.
3. Reflecting on the process of analysis.
4. Organising the data to look for patterns and themes.
5. Connecting emergent themes to larger concepts and theories, and collecting more data afterwards.

Based on the steps mentioned above, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading the transcripts and subsequently asking relevant questions that arose. Afterwards, the researchers developed codes according to their interpretation of the data, and then grouped related codes under broader headings, which led to the formation of themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Finally, the researchers abbreviated each theme and assembled the data materials under each respective theme. These themes were reviewed and reworked to produce a structured report of analysis. Following this process as proposed by Friedman (2012) led to an extensive interpretation of data.

Limitations

The main limitation is that the study includes only a few parents of learners and the teachers from one Quintile 1 primary school in Mamelodi, South Africa. Therefore, the findings of this research cannot be generalised beyond the research population. In future, it would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study involving more schools within a similar school category to broaden the findings. However, this study is still useful in providing a glimpse of the mother-tongue situation in schools within a similar environment.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the data collected from semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents that were analysed to uncover the participants' views on mother tongue instruction will be presented. The data of the parents' interviews (n = 10, see Appendix A) will be presented first, followed by the data from teachers' interviews (n = 10, see Appendix B). The responses of parents and teachers towards home language instruction were used to extract emerging themes and patterns from the data.

Theme 1: Language Use at Home

The first set of questions (Appendix A) sought to understand the language practices in the homes of the learners and parents given that this was likely to influence their attitudes and perceptions towards home language instruction. Because the background and setting of each parent differed, the responses were also varied. One of the questions posed in the parent interviews was "What other languages can you speak fluently, besides your home language?" While all parents indicated that they spoke one or more vernacular South African language in addition to their home language, what was notable was that these parents stated that they could also speak English fluently. Examples of some of the parent respondents' responses are indicated below:

I can speak isiZulu, Sesotho, Sepedi. And I'm fluent in English. (Pf3)

English, Setswana, Sepedi and the other one is isiSwati. (Pf7)

I speak English and SeSotho sometimes. (Pf1)

The responses above indicate that parents of learners at the school are multilingual speakers and are fluent in more than one vernacular South African language, including English. Learners at this school are therefore exposed to multiple languages due to their environment at home. It was also curious to note Parent Pf3's emphasis on the ability to speak English fluently as if to drive a point home to the researcher about the importance of being fluent in English. This is in line with research that highlights the hegemonic status that English continues to enjoy in many classrooms (Naidoo, 2012). In another vein, Zano (2024) observed that some parents bring up their children speaking both a home language and an additional language, English.

A follow-up question was posed to establish the language of communication between parents and children at home. In this regard, parents were asked to identify the language that was spoken with their children in their home, and to indicate their views about communicating in English at home. The following question was posed: "Which language do you use to communicate with your children at home and why?" in this context, most parents reported that they used a combination of their home language and additional languages, which could include a second vernacular language or English. However, a few parents indicated that they communicated with their children solely in their mother tongue. For example, Parent Pf1 commented as follows:

I use my language, isiNdebele, because they understand me easily when I speak to them.

Upon examination of the parents' responses, it became evident that most parents use vernacular languages to communicate with their children at home. The ease with which children understand their parents' instructions when communicating in their own language was highlighted by Parent Pf1, as indicated above. On the other hand, some parents' responses indicate that their approach in

communicating with the learners was more of a strategy to empower the child with the home language and support them on their language studies. A good example of this approach is reflected in the following response from Parent Pf3:

I use Swati and Zulu most of the time because she's [the child] doing Zulu at school and then at home we are Swati but we're trying to communicate with her more with Zulu so that she can be fluent with the language.

An interesting comment was raised by Parent Pf5 regarding the language she used to communicate with her child at home. Neither parent's home language is Setswana, yet they chose to use the language. As indicated earlier, parents have a voice in determining the language situation in the schools and in this case, the language preference of this parent was due to personal reasons related to a sense of belonging within a geographic context:

I communicate with my child in Setswana simply because both my husband and I, we grew up in a community where we were speaking in Setswana language. So, we brought that into our house as well. (Pf5)

In this regard, it is arguable that most parents use their home language and other comprehensible vernacular languages to ensure that they are clearly understood by their children when they express themselves or direct children in any given situation. In Moganedi's (2024) study in which she sought to find out the attitudes of the parents' and teachers' attitudes to home language learning the research findings also revealed that parents use a combination of their home language and additional languages for communication with their children at home. It is also debatable that the respondents' choice of languages could have been influenced by factors such as cultural heritage, academic needs, and geographic context. Another example in Moganedi's research findings was that most parents stated that they spoke *Sepitori* [Mamelodi pidgin] as a home language because it was the language of the local community, while others emphasised the importance of maintaining their home language as a means of preserving cultural identity. These findings shed light on the critical role of parents in fostering the use of mother tongue for learning in primary schools.

Theme 2: Mother Tongue Use in the Classroom

Prior to informing the parents about the school's language policy, they were asked to provide their opinion on how home languages should be used in the classroom. Their responses indicated that parents preferred vernacular language at home but viewed them as unsuitable for classrooms due to diversity and communication barriers. As shown in Theme 1, it is arguable that the parents' approach in this case could be that of the "think globally, act locally" aspect of glocalisation (Qenai & Wright 2025, p. 23). For most parents, English is more significant and more meaningful and should be the main language of communication in the classroom while the mother tongue should only be used for socialising and during the mother tongue periods. It may be that participants Parent Pf1's and Parent Pf5's adverse view of mother tongues stem from their association of English as a language of economic and social mobility. Such parents have chosen to retain their mother tongue in everyday family and social contexts but not for formal use. One parent's sentiment was as follows:

It should be used outside the classroom. You know now with the mixed language school; I think English is a common language for everybody. Imagine they are speaking many different languages; they don't even understand each other. I believe English is best in the classroom. (Pf2)

After referring parents to information about official language policies that state learners can receive education in the language of their choice, parents were further asked to share their thoughts about the idea of learners being taught in their mother tongue from Grades 1 to 12. Surprisingly, most parents' responses supported the notion of mother tongue. They asserted that teaching learners in their mother tongue would have a positive impact in their education. Parent Pf3 expressed the following:

Learners will produce good grades. Children understand their home language from day one and they speak everything in their home language. They won't have to switch to English when studying subjects like accounting. Nothing will be difficult for them. It will always be easier for them to adjust.

Parent Pf7 also noted that mother tongue can now be used in broader economic spaces:

We live in a democratic world. It will be much better for our kids because when we grew up, we were told that we supposed to know English and Afrikaans because when you go to interviews, they will talk to you in English or Afrikaans. But we live in a democratic world where you can even talk in your home language in an interview. So, home languages will be useful.

Examining these answers, it is evident that parents' views were conflicted after being referred to the information about the policies. For example, parents such as Parent Pf3 perceived specific benefits of teaching learners in their mother tongue, while some parents showed disapproval for mother-tongue education. According to Parent Pf3 and Parent Pf7, one of the benefits of learning in the home language is that it eliminates the need to constantly switch between English and the mother tongue. As per these parents' observations, learners exert considerable effort in translating subject matter from English to their home language, particularly in specialised subjects such as accounting. Learning in their mother tongue would negate this challenge. However, some parents believe that the current bilingual approach to language learning, where learners are exposed to both English and their mother tongue, remains the better option. It is arguable that all the arguments are valid considering that glocalisation in education recognises that learning should adapt to the needs of diverse communities beyond any single national or cultural context (Hocutt & Brown, 2018).

Parents were asked to weigh in on the potential effects of mother tongue instruction on learners' academic achievement. Most parents concurred, based on the results that teaching learners in their mother tongue would improve their grades. For example, one participant's response was as follows:

Yes. I think learner grades will improve because he would understand more compared to when they are taught in English. If you look at our children's performance, home language is better than English. (Parent Pf7)

Such issues mirror wider linguistic conflicts, in which the functional use of a language often clashes with its integrative or cultural value (Fishman, 2001). It is also worth noting that other parents strategically prefer English as LoLT to support their children's academic language proficiency, which cannot be ignored. This point further cements the concept of glocalisation, which focuses on the integration of global language practices with local linguistic resources, including code-switching and translanguaging (Wright, 2025). Notably, Parent Pf3's response aims to support the child's learning, with a focus on isiZulu, whereas others emphasise English—an approach that may be viewed as fostering glocalisation. In this regard, these findings underscore the complex nature of language use within households, environment, and the diverse motivations driving language choices.

Theme 3: Language of Learning and Teaching

To establish teachers' attitudes toward mother tongue as LoLT, teachers were asked if the learners at the school were currently being educated in their mother tongue, and to share whether they felt that it was the right decision. The responses from most teachers indicated that they had a positive attitude toward using mother tongue only during the home language lesson but not across all learning areas. Teacher Tf6 commented as follows:

Learners are only taught in their home language during the home language period. I feel that's right.

The statement by Teacher Tf6 gives the impression that some teachers have accepted that home languages should only be taught during the home language period. Further responses from other teachers confirmed that learners were not educated in their home language. Teachers did their jobs accordingly because this approach was what was expected of them. This is confirmed by Teacher Tm1 below who indicated that some teachers do not believe that teaching learners in English is right, however, they see English as a suitable language for teaching and learning in a multilingual context:

Learners are educated in English because let me say, in Grade 7, they are doing nine learning areas. Eight learning areas are being taught in English because that is the language of teaching and learning. So, they [learners] should be taught in English so that they can be conversant with this language. Because obviously, from primary and beyond, they will be taught in that language. So, they must get used to that language from this primary level. It is not right but I think English is appropriate for teaching and learning.

To add to the sentiment stated above, teachers acknowledged that they rely heavily on code-switching due to the abrupt language change that learners experience from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Code-switching refers to the utilisation of two languages during a single dialogue exchange to promote mutual understanding between learners and teacher (Shinga & Pillay, 2021). Teacher Tf1 expressed that the transition between Grade 3 and Grade 4 was not smooth:

For example, I'm [also] teaching mathematics in Grade 4. We have a problem because they are teaching mathematics in Sepedi in Grade 3. When they get to Grade 4, I'm teaching them in English. They taught them how to use the term "hlakantsha" to refer to "addition." When they go to Grade 4, we say "addition." That's where the problem lies. It becomes worse when it comes to problem solving. When they have to deal with numbers which include words.

The views expressed by Teacher (Tf1) reiterated the challenge faced by teachers who are non-native English speakers. Learners have limited vocabulary in the English language. It is crucial to remember that the shift from the mother tongue to the first additional language must be orderly and steady. In addition, it is also worth noting that from parents' responses in Theme 1, parents and learners communicated more in vernacular languages at home, therefore, an introduction to a new language such as English should be gradual, with proper support.

Regarding language use in the classroom, teachers were asked if learners were free to use their language of choice during the learning process. Most teachers confirmed that learners were free to use their language of choice when the teachers are not around. Furthermore, the languages that were used by learners for interaction were a combination of English and their home languages. In this light, the responses by participant teachers below were not clear given that one suggested that learners were allowed to use their language choice freely, while the other two sounded as if they expected the learners to speak English even though that was not the case in some instances. Furthermore, Teacher Tm2's response implied that learners were not free to use their language of choice in their teachers' presence.

Presently, learners use their language of choice in all classes, especially if there are no teachers. They make a noise in their home language. (Teacher Tm2)

Children are free to use their language of choice in the classroom. (Teacher Tf8)

Yes, but if we permit them to use their own language, the problem will be in writing. (Teacher Tf3)

The response above by Teacher (Tm2) may also suggest that learners use their mother tongue express their opinions liberally, and this happens in the absence of teachers who might expect them to express themselves in English. It can therefore be concluded that learners use their mother tongue to foster collaboration and understanding as they interact freely around others who comprehend the vernacular languages spoken amongst them. While teachers at this primary school acknowledge the importance of mother tongue in the classroom, challenges in language proficiency and academic performance seem to prompt a shift towards English instruction, thus undermining the CAPS emphasis on mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase. Thus, the preference by certain teachers for using mother tongue as LoLT is justified since it necessitates that the LoLT should be aligned with the language that the learner brings into the classroom. However, in the view of Desai (2012), most learners from township schools are faced with issues related to decoding the language before grasping the content, and this demonstrates the inequalities relating to language use in South African schools.

Conclusion

The investigation of the Quintile 1 primary school parents' and teachers' views on the use of mother tongue for learning and teaching has provided a glimpse into the controversies associated with mother tongue instruction in primary schools. The views of these teachers and parents confirmed the belief that English is associated with opportunities and a better future for children. Although the cultural and cognitive advantages of learning a mother tongue are widely acknowledged in literature, there remain conflicting views on how best this can be implemented without challenges in primary schools. In many cases, teachers may understand the benefits of teaching in the mother tongue, but parents may still prefer their children to be taught in the language that they believe exposes their children to better opportunities in the glocal space, and upward mobility in their careers. These further cement the relevance of glocalisation as the underpinning conceptual framework in this study, which demonstrated the parents' preference for English as the LoLT while some of them acknowledged the need for teaching the children in their mother tongue. As for the teachers, they demonstrated their awareness of the importance of teaching the learners in the languages that they best understood even though this presented its own challenges for the teachers. One may conclude that the views of the parents and teachers are aligned with the principles of glocalisation. Future research should focus on equipping the parents with more knowledge on blending local and global trends in language learning.

Disclosure of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule for Parents

Questions

1. What other language/s can you speak fluently, besides your home language?
2. Is your child currently being educated in their home language? Do you feel that that is right?
3. Does your child's school have a language policy? Why do you think that is?
4. Which language do you use when communicating with your children at home? If so why, or if not, why not?
5. What are your views about communicating in English at home?
6. Should learners be encouraged to communicate in English at home? Please explain.
7. Do you think speaking English as opposed to home language has any benefits to the learners? What may those benefits be?
8. Are parents officially informed about the language policies at the school? How did you come to this conclusion?
9. Which stakeholders do you think should be involved in decisions regarding languages of learning and teaching at the school?
10. The Department of Basic Education's language policy states that all children should be free to use their languages of choice in classrooms. Do you think this is currently practiced at your school? What do you think is the best-case scenario?
11. What do you think is the impact of home language instruction in learners' academic performance? Do you agree that learners' grades will improve if all their subjects are taught in their home languages? Please explain.
12. In your opinion, are learners free to use their language of choice during the learning process? What is your biggest fear regarding this?
13. How should home languages be used in the classroom? What are this situation's pros and cons?
14. Can you share your thoughts about learners being taught in their home language for their entire education (Grades 1–12)? Please elaborate.
15. Do you agree/disagree with the view that learning how to speak English prepares one for higher education?

Appendix B: Interview Schedule for Teachers

Questions

1. What other language/s can you speak fluently, besides your home language?
2. Are your learners currently being educated in their home language? Do you feel that that is right?
3. Does the school have a language policy? Why do you think that is?
4. Which language do you use when communicating with learners in the classroom? Why?
5. What are your views about communicating in the learners' home language in the classroom?
6. Should learners be encouraged to communicate in their home language in the classroom? Please explain.
7. Do you think speaking English as opposed to home language has any benefits to the learners? What may those benefits be?
8. Are teachers/SGB members officially informed about the language policies at the school? How did you come to this conclusion?
9. Which stakeholders do you think should be involved in decisions regarding languages of learning and teaching at the school?
10. The Department of Basic Education's language policy states that all children should be free to use their languages of choice in classrooms. Do you think this is currently practised at your school? What do you think is the best-case scenario?
11. What do you think is the impact of home language instruction in learners' academic performance? Do you agree that learners' grades will improve if all their subjects are taught in their home languages? Please explain.
12. In your opinion, are learners free to use their language of choice during the learning process? What is your biggest fear regarding this?
13. How should home languages be used in the classroom? What are this situation's pros and cons?
14. Can you share your thoughts about learners being taught in their home language for their entire education (Grades 1–12)? Please elaborate.
15. Do you agree/disagree with the view that learning how to speak English prepares one for higher education?

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Challenging Monolingualism: A Global South Perspective on Translanguaging in Teacher Education³

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Abstract

The increasing use of translanguaging approaches in the past two decades has actively contributed to the constant disruption of monolingual educational paradigms. While translanguaging's potential to challenge prevailing language ideologies is widely acknowledged, a significant gap exists in understanding its application and impact within Global South contexts, particularly beyond its use as a mere scaffolding tool. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the practical implementation and impact of translanguaging instruction within a Master of Education postgraduate programme at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa. Employing a case study approach, this research examines how translanguaging, strategically framed through the lens of the African philosophy of ubuntu, cultivates a cohesive and integrated approach to meaning making. For the purposes of data collection, participants were first introduced to translanguaging pedagogy and then tasked with applying these practices in a teaching context. Thereafter, they were asked to write reflective essays on the impact of using translanguaging within their classrooms. The investigation specifically analyses these reflective essays on conceptualising and applying translanguaging in Johannesburg schools. The findings of this research reveal that ubuntu translanguaging has the unique capacity to transcend the seemingly contradictory nature of socially defined language boundaries. It achieves this by fostering a holistic understanding of linguistic repertoires, thereby promoting a sense of interconnectedness and shared understanding. Consequently, this study advocates for the implementation of comprehensive curricular reforms that prioritise cultural relevance and interconnectedness within comparable Global South educational contexts. By centring the experiences and perspectives of the Global South, this research contributes to a more nuanced and equitable understanding of the transformative potential of translanguaging.

Key words: monolingualism, multilingualism, translanguaging, ubuntu translanguaging, pedagogical translanguaging, linguistic repertoire

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Introduction

The 21st century is characterised by an unprecedented increase in human mobility, leading to heightened linguistic complexity across the globe (Canagarajah, 2013, 2021; Sah, 2017; Simpson, 2017; Vertovec, 2022; Zou et al., 2025). While this mobility is often perceived through a Global North lens, focusing on migration from less developed countries, its reality is far more universal and multifaceted. Indeed, the concept of “superdiversity,” developed to capture the complexities of heightened migration in the Global North, reflects a reality long understood in non-Western contexts, where multilingualism is the norm (Brock-Utne, 2024; Makalela & White, 2021). Research consistently demonstrates that translingual communication is a fundamental aspect of global language use, with a significant portion of the world’s population engaging in multilingual practices (Flores, 2024; Makoni & Pennycook, 2023). However, the dominant educational paradigm, often rooted in monolingual ideologies, continues to marginalise and misrepresent the onto-epistemological realities of the Global South (Flores, 2024; Makoni & Pennycook, 2023; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021). Despite growing evidence highlighting the superior learning outcomes associated with strategies that leverage learners’ full linguistic repertoires (García, 2020; Makalela, 2019; Probyn, 2019), monolingual teaching practices persist, disproportionately disadvantaging multilingual ways of knowing and being (Fallas Escobar, 2019; Jonsson, 2019).

Translanguaging, as an alternative strategy, offers cognitive advantages for multilingual learners’ meaning making (García, 2018). While much research has explored its application in basic education and undergraduate contexts, often through Western sociolinguistic frameworks, a critical gap remains: the exploration of how translanguaging strategies can transform teacher education programmes at the postgraduate level, particularly when interpreted through Global South epistemologies. This study addresses this gap by investigating the efficacy of employing translanguaging toolkits in a Master of Education course. The study’s methodology involved introducing in-service teachers, who were enrolled in the course, to translanguaging pedagogy and then tasking them with applying it in their teaching practices. The current research then examines the impact of this pedagogical tool on their teaching. By centring Global South perspectives, this research aims to disrupt the persistent monolingual bias within postgraduate education and contribute to the development of culturally relevant pedagogical practices. The application of ubuntu-informed translanguaging in a Master of Education course offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate its disruptive power in fostering multilingual induction of graduate students, challenging traditional Western conceptions of language and learning. This paper will proceed by first outlining the theoretical framework grounding our approach, focusing on ubuntu translanguaging and its relevance to disrupting monolingual bias. Next, we will describe the methodology employed in our case study, detailing the design and implementation of the Master of Education course. Following this, we will present and analyse our findings, highlighting the impact of Global South interpreted translanguaging on student learning and engagement. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research for teacher education and offer recommendations for future research in teacher education.

Translanguaging as a Global South Sociolinguistic Reality

Translanguaging is a normal multilingual strategy used for meaning making and for the affirmation of multilingual identities (Almashour, 2024; Wei, 2018). As a pedagogical strategy, it entails a planned alternation of the languages of input and output in spoken and written work to enhance understanding of learned content and improve epistemic access for multilingual learners. Through the translanguaging lens, language is seen as an ongoing “process” rather than a “thing”—a verb rather than a noun, as in the notion of “languaging” (Wei, 2018). In this way, the focus shifts from a simple inventory of the separate languages an individual speaks to how they flexibly and dynamically deploy their full range of linguistic resources to achieve their communicative purposes (Probyn, 2019). Through translanguaging, multilingual individuals

have the advantage of achieving all their communicative needs more effectively because it allows them to engage all their linguistic resources in the act of communication. Perhaps the analogy that fully explains translanguaging can be found in García's (2012) description of an all-terrain vehicle, which makes movement forward possible even on uneven ground. The all-terrain vehicle moves forward even when the ground is uneven because of its ability to bend, turn, and flex to help movement forward. This means that when given the space to fully employ all their linguistic repertoires in a classroom situation, no matter how complex the explanation or the information the learner needs to communicate, the student will successfully do this.

Through translanguaging, teachers and learners can engage fully with teaching and learning content because they are allowed to use all the linguistic repertoires at their disposal (Hornberger & Link, 2012; Makalela, 2016). In support of the notion of a linguistic repertoire, translanguaging challenges the conventional understanding of language boundaries between culturally and politically labelled languages, and goes beyond the linguistic system itself to incorporate doing language (Makoni & Pennycook, 2023). This includes assembling the linguistic and multimodal practices that speakers have acquired through social interaction, as well as their embodied cognition (García & Wei, 2014). Since the speaker's lexical and structural resources constitute only a small part of this assemblage, translanguaging not only posits a single linguistic system, a single set of linguistic resources, but also goes well beyond it to encompass a communicative repertoire that is often seen as outside of what traditionally is defined as the "linguistic" (Makoni & Pennycook, 2023; Pennycook, 2017). This means that translanguaging goes beyond understanding language as simply what we have traditionally called linguistic, which may include, among other things, like-named languages or their components, for example, lexicon, morphology, and phonology. It incorporates an understanding of how different modes, including our bodies, our gestures, our lives, and so forth, add to the semiotic meaning-making repertoire that is involved in the act of communication (García, 2020). Translanguaging acknowledges the entire range of multimodal resources that make up the speaker's full communicative repertoire, and this may include gestures, gazes, posture, visual cues, and even human–technology interactions. Thus, the concept of translanguaging also pays attention to the multimodal ways in which learners make meaning both with their bodies and outside of their bodies (Kress, 2015; Wei, 2018, 2022). Thus, through translanguaging, an individual's entire linguistic ethnography, including their bodies, place, and things, is acknowledged as a tool for effective communication (García & Otheguy, 2020). In corroboration, Wei (2018) wrote that the act of translanguaging is transformative; it creates a social space for the multilingual language user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience, and environment, their attitudes, beliefs, and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance—and transforming it into a lived experience. This is a comprehensive view of translanguaging that is disruptive of the one-ness ideology that so far predominates many schooling contexts.

To frame this study, we focused on current translanguaging debates, specifically the discussion on whether languages are internal "I" or external "E" (MacSwan, 2017). Internal languages refer to the languages that are known to the speaker and have become part of their identity. External languages refer to languages as they are socially named. Other scholars have attacked this notion, advocating for a differentiated view of linguistic repertoires in line with socially named languages (MacSwan, 2017). Others have also argued that translanguaging valorises linguistic repertoires and ignores embodied repertoires like gestures, gaze, tone, and so on (Burton, 2023; Takaki, 2023). Our stance is that all these debates are based on a discrete separation of the speaker from the hearer, on the one hand, and these interlocutors' holistic performance, which is inclusive of each other as well as the spatial contexts they occupy, on the other hand. Rather, we choose to explain this complexity through a Southern theory-derived model of translanguaging named ubuntu translanguaging, which is based on the African cosmic view of interdependence as found in the "I am because you are" to demonstrate an infinite relation of dependency (Makalela, 2016, 2019). This framework is seen as resonating with Global South epistemologies and value

systems. This means that there is no terminal endpoint between languages where one language always remains the empirical being that is incomplete without the other in the process of complex meaning making. We posit that meaning making is continuous, a state of being where identities are constantly disrupted and built at the same time for effective communication, as contained in the discontinuous continuity tenet of ubuntu translanguaging (Makalela, 2016). Put differently, multilingual learners have an unlimited capacity to disrupt old discourses and recreate new ones simultaneously for effective meaning making.

Disrupting Monolingual Bias

As highlighted earlier, debates on the efficacy of translanguaging in disrupting monolingual ideologies and practices that predominate schooling systems globally, show that the practice has the power to enable effective teaching and learning at all levels in education (García, 2020; Makalela, 2019; Probyn, 2019). In this regard, therefore, there is a need for the preparation and production of teachers who are prepared to teach in ways that acknowledge and legitimise the language practices of the complex multilingual populations that make up the bulk of the student population in contemporary classrooms (Musanti & Rodríguez, 2017). However, there is a limited number of studies that have explored how in-service teachers pursuing postgraduate degrees can be prepared adequately to deal with multilingual learners. A close review of the available literature shows that studies are concentrated on the attitudes and experiences of pre-service teachers on translanguaging and not much on their future stances as postgraduate practising teachers (Iversen, 2020; Musanti & Rodríguez, 2017).

Although recent literature from the Global North has started to address this gap by focusing on the crucial shift in teacher attitudes, studies show that deeply ingrained institutional policies favouring English-only instruction and a lack of professional training often prevent the widespread adoption of translanguaging (Cenoz et al., 2024; Wong, 2024). This is because a teacher's personal and biographical experiences are crucial for their acceptance of translanguaging, highlighting a need for a critical stance that examines power dynamics and personal positionality. A qualitative case study exploring translanguaging practices of pre-service bilingual teachers in academic writing found that Latina pre-service bilingual teachers creatively leveraged their Spanish and English linguistic repertoires to produce meaningful Spanish writing (Musanti & Rodríguez, 2017). In a study that examined the language ideology and identity practice shifts among 20 Mexican-Latinx pre-service bilingual teachers exposed to a semester-long translanguaging space, it was found that teachers developed better understandings of their language ideologies and new stances not only as language users but also as language teachers (Caldas, 2019). Moreover, the participants agreed that speaking without borders was liberating and provided a model of what being bilingual teachers could be, while legitimising those practices. The study further demonstrated how a translanguaging space can disrupt the language barrier between stigmatised linguistic practices and the formal discourses of the university, empowering bicultural voices to emerge and challenge linguistic subordination. All the participants in the study agreed that the language policy they would enforce in their future classrooms would resemble the open language policy in the research site because they had experienced its benefits firsthand. Thus, exposure to a translanguaging space enabled the adoption of a teacher stance that would promote translanguaging within their future classrooms (Wei, 2011).

In the same vein, Makalela (2015) reported on the shifts experienced by university learners who were expected to learn Sepedi as a new language. The study highlighted two significant findings: firstly, that translanguaging strategies are effective in increasing the vocabulary levels of multilingual learners, and secondly, that reflective accounts from participants reveal that breaking down language boundaries creates a positive schooling experience and helps learners develop identities that support educational success. Through exposure to translanguaging, these teachers developed attitudes that would significantly question the discourse rooted in nation-states, language, and language standards ideologies (Iversen, 2020). In other words, through their experiences of what translanguaging afforded them, these teachers were prepared to acknowledge multilingualism within their classrooms and leverage it for effective

teaching and learning. This research, along with other recent studies, demonstrates that there are infinite relations of dependency between the languages a multilingual speaker has, and that one language is incomplete without the other. By implication, multilingual speakers need the full use of all the communicative competencies available to them.

In South Africa, despite ample evidence demonstrating the positive impact of translanguaging on multilingual learners' academic performance, there is a notable paucity of research reporting on its implementation within South African institutions of higher education, particularly those responsible for training teachers for the nation's diverse linguistic landscape. While recent scholarship in higher education contexts has begun to explicitly link translanguaging to decolonising classroom practices and challenging the marginalisation of indigenous languages (Madiba, 2024; Mbirimi-Hungwe & Matariro, 2024), there is a distinct lack of studies focusing on sensitising pre-service teachers or in-service teachers pursuing postgraduate degrees to effective multilingual pedagogies for the diverse South African context. It is against this critical backdrop, characterised by a scarcity of research in universities actively preparing in-service teachers for these challenges, that the current study aims not only to fill this specific knowledge gap but also to foreground a Global South perspective of translanguaging—a perspective often obscured by Western hegemonic conceptions, which frequently relegate marginalised languages to mere steppingstones for acquiring dominant languages.

The Study

This was a participatory action research project grounded in the logic of the participants as both researchers and participants at the same time. In this research paradigm, there is co-construction of research instruments, co-collection of data, and joint analysis between the researchers and the participants. When framed in this light, the boundary between the researcher and the researched is blurred as metaphorically valorised within the ubuntu injunction: "I am because you are." Participants for this study were seven students registered as part-time Master of Education students at a university in Johannesburg, where both authors were lecturers. These participants were therefore, conveniently sampled to participate in this study. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. All participating students were provided with comprehensive information about the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time, and all of them gave their informed consent to participate. The authors were acutely aware of their position as lecturers for this master's course and implemented measures, such as ensuring anonymity in data handling and involving an independent researcher for initial data classification, to mitigate any potential influence on students, data collection, or analysis. All the participating students were part-time Master in Education degree students and full-time teachers in various schools in Johannesburg—a world-class African city characterised by both horizontal and vertical multilingualism (Brock-Utne, 2024). Five of these students were female and two were male, with a mean age of 26 years and 4 months. They were all multilingual and spoke a variety of South African official languages. Two of them also spoke African languages that are found predominantly beyond the borders of South Africa.

As part of the course, students underwent a 12-week induction on translanguaging and post-methods lessons, which allowed for debates and application of their ideas as they evolved throughout the course. In the end, they participated in metacognitive reflections about how they viewed multilingualism before the class and how they were after the class. The purpose of the induction into multilingualism and multilingual teaching strategies was twofold: firstly, it was meant to raise the student teachers' awareness of monolingual biases entrenched in the curriculum, and secondly, to prepare them to challenge the traditional method of teaching which privileges one language at the expense of effective teaching and learning for multilingual learners.

Premised on the tenets of ubuntu translanguaging, which foregrounded infinite relations of dependencies and transversal incompleteness of one language without others, the course was one semester long, approximately four months. The lectures occurred once a week for two hours every Tuesday, from

4–6 pm. The postgraduate student participants were exposed to two weeks of a broad introduction to translanguaging and 12 weeks of induction to translanguaging theory and practice. They were asked to choose readings and hold mini lectures where they could use all the linguistic skills at their disposal. Throughout the sessions, data were collected through weekly reflections and analysis with one seasoned and independent researcher and the two lecturers. The participants were also encouraged to critically engage with each other's work. Participants were further invited to attend a conference with lesson demonstrations by actual teachers from schools that have adopted translanguaging as an approach for learning and teaching. They used this modelling exercise as a resource for data collection and learning sets aligned with the course offerings. To effect change in their classrooms, the students were asked to carry out action research at their schools to practise and research the disruptive potential of translanguaging. At the end of the semester, participants submitted a written reflection of 2,500–3,000 words assessing their epistemic beliefs and stances towards translanguaging as a pedagogical tool. As data sets, the submitted essays were analysed, first by an independent researcher, who had been involved with this class for all the lectures, then by the authors, using a universal reductionist approach in which the data were re-read several times and classified into themes until saturation points were reached. These themes were supported by prototypical extracts from the essays, which are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Results

Results were drawn from the students' reflections on the kind of teacher they became after the 12-week induction into translanguaging theory and practice. This is discussed below under the following six themes:

- Awareness of systemic monolingualism.
- Teachers as perpetrators of linguistic genocide.
- Translanguaging as a catalyst for language maintenance.
- Translanguaging for epistemic access.
- Inflicting the same pain.
- Teacher's future multilingual stances.

Awareness of Systemic Monolingualism

The results of the study revealed that the induction through translanguaging theory and the opportunities to do action research in their classrooms heightened the teachers' awareness of monolingual dominance that prevailed in the entire schooling sector. The excerpt below is typical: A wall I had not anticipated hitting was that the learners are not comfortable in using their mother tongues in class. Many of my learners were conformers rather than reformers, and they could not fathom disobeying the constructs of language learning that had been enforced so thoroughly in their own schooling.

In this excerpt, the participant notes that they were not aware that the dominant use of English as the only language of learning and teaching had led to learners having less appreciation of their own languages. Due to their resistance to using their own languages, the participant views them as conformers who comply with systemic monolingual bias that has been ingrained "so thoroughly" in the whole schooling sector. The sense of discomfort in using languages other than English is found in the phrase, "not comfortable in using their mother tongues in class." Here, the curriculum system has been infested with the ideology of one-ness, where only one language is considered the optimal condition for successful learning and teaching. This realisation on the part of the in-service teacher participant implies that the translanguaging course structure had an impact on heightening consciousness of monolingual bias, which was subliminally conditioned as the only norm for schooling. In line with García (2020), critical pedagogy of translanguaging is effective in disrupting the ideology of one-ness and the power of monolingualism.

In the same vein and in extending the realisation of the negative effects of systemic monolingualism in the learning of multilingual learners, another participant reflected thus:

I was unaware that by asking them to use English only I am actually taking away their identity and giving them what I thought was “valid” identity, however, now that I am aware that language carries culture . . . I allow them to be who they are by allowing them to use their language to make sense of the subject matter and still help them gain content knowledge.

The participant reveals that they were not aware that asking learners to use English only was asking them to let go of their being. This is evident in the statement, “taking away their identity.” The participant further explains that the course has made them conscious that language is one’s culture and, as a result, they allow the learners under their care to be who they are by enabling or allowing them to use their own languages in learning. The participants also realised that by so doing, the learners still “gain subject content.” Thus, through exposure to the class, the teacher will now be able to create a safe translanguaging space for their learners to practise their being and, in the process, learn effectively. Similarly, other scholars identified three components of translanguaging educational practices that teachers who work with multilingual learners need to develop, and these are stance, design, and shifts (García et al., 2017; Kleyne & García, 2019). The stance refers to the teachers’ awareness and acknowledgement of the learners’ ways of knowing, which will inform the teachers’ ways of designing the classroom experiences that are inclusive of their learners’ ways of being.

Heightened Content Access

Another important finding that came out of the current study is that the teachers realised that the use of translanguaging as a pedagogical tool enabled learners to develop deeper understandings of subject content. This is exemplified in the following extract:

Multilinguals, because of their personal language experiences and histories, are already equipped with capital as they enter the classroom. The capital is the funds of knowledge, the learners’ language knowledge and skills, which can be used in the classroom to enhance understanding of concepts.

The participant explains that learners who speak multiple languages walk into classroom contexts already with resources in the form of their lived experiences and language skills that teachers can leverage for effective teaching. The participant calls these “funds of knowledge,” which they argue can be used to “enhance understanding of concepts.” This means that the course enabled the participant to realise that if spaces are opened and learners are allowed to use all the resources they bring to the learning environment, they understand concepts better. In support of this view, Moll et al. (2005) argued that the language skills learners bring into classroom contexts should be seen as funds of knowledge that can be used for comprehension of subject content. On another level, this excerpt echoes what García (2020) highlighted, arguing for the repositioning of the teachers’ focus when teaching reading to speakers of multiple languages and positing that the learner must be the central focus of the reading activity. This means that the student and all the skills they bring to the reading process must be leveraged for effective reading. Thus, the student’s history, languages, and experiences should be acknowledged so that the learners are able to read themselves in the texts they read in classroom settings for effective comprehension.

Perpetrators of Linguistic Genocide

Linguistic genocide is where the number of speakers of a language variety is decreased until there are either no speakers of the language variety or there are no fluent speakers of the language. Through being inducted during the 12-week translanguaging theory, the participants came to realise that their attitude or treatment of languages in their classrooms was tantamount to linguistic genocide. This was in line with the way they treated the languages brought into their classrooms by the learners under their care. The following excerpt exemplifies this:

I can fully say I was the translanguaging nightmare, a perpetrator of linguistic genocide with ideologies that were informed by monolingual and monoglossic practices, informed by Eurocentric views on language.

This excerpt narrates the sudden realisation by the participant that they were the main barrier to the use of multiple languages within their classroom. The participant uses the words “translanguaging nightmare” to show the extent to which they would not accept the use of other languages within their classroom before exposure to the master’s class. The participant views themselves as one who contributed to the extinction of the learners’ languages. This is clearly captured when the participant describes themselves as a “perpetrator of linguistic genocide”—one who contributes to the death of another language. The participant now views their actions as some sort of crime, as carried in the meaning of the word “perpetrator.” The participant also realises that their view of languages is not locally orientated, as it is influenced by foreign policies set for a different context. The participant uses the phrase “Eurocentric view of languages” to emphasise this. This, they realise, led to their contribution towards linguistic genocide. They had been contributing to the death of the languages brought into their classroom by the learners by not allowing their use in teaching and learning.

Catalyst for Language Maintenance

One other important finding of this study was that it raised the participants’ awareness of the important fact that, besides being a powerful pedagogical tool for teaching multilingual learners, translanguaging was pivotal to the preservation of previously endangered or disempowered languages. The following extract is a typical example:

Translanguaging seems to be a worthwhile resource in maintaining and revitalising all languages. Here, the participant notes that they realised that translanguaging helps maintain and enrich all languages. Thus, translanguaging is seen as a tool that can be used for empowering languages at risk of being killed by other languages. The more a language is used, the more it becomes important and valuable. If the students’ languages are not used in state institutions, such as schools, they might end up extinct. The participant realises that using the students’ languages is not only important for effective teaching and learning experiences but also for empowering the languages themselves (Lewis et al., 2012).

Inflicting the same pain

Through this course, the participating students realised that instead of giving education, they were giving pain by repeating the old ways of teaching, which were not helpful academically to them during their schooling time. The extract below is a good example of this realisation:

It dawned [on] me that I have been doing exactly what my teachers were doing to me, teaching me in a way that was confusing and one that I could hardly communicate efficiently in.

The student uses the word “dawned” to indicate that the realisation was new, like a new day signifying new beginnings. The student acknowledges that, as a school child, using one language or the school language was difficult because as it posed challenges in communicating effectively or with meaning and consequently, the learned material was confusing. Thus, the participant realised that subject content was confusing during their schooling time because they were taught differently from how they were used to accessing knowledge. They were used to accessing knowledge multilingually, but the school expected them to access knowledge monolingually and, as a result, they struggled to walk on the path of knowing or becoming knowledgeable (García, 2020). In support of this view, Guzula et al. (2016) wrote that for as long as Anglo normative tendencies and views persist, multilingual learners will continue to be positioned as deficient, deviant, or at risk of failing. This resonates with García (2020), who explained that not allowing learners to use their languages for learning means that they would never walk on the path of coming to know, and this positions them as learners at risk of failing. In most cases, these learners eventually fail or are asked to repeat a grade. In some cases, they drop out of school. This effect has several disadvantages, including other violations like social justice, where these learners are excluded from civic engagements beyond school. The participants acknowledged that exposure to translanguaging teaching pedagogies

raised their awareness that if learners are to learn successfully, they needed to use their languages for negotiating meanings in subject content. This is because their languages depend on each other for effective or successful communication or comprehensive engagement with curriculum content (Makalela, 2016).

Translanguaging and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP)

On realising that most educational practices are monolingually orientated, some participants problematised the interpretation and the extent to which South Africa's language in education policy, which accords official status to 12 official languages and adopts multilingualism, is implemented in institutions of learning. The next excerpt highlighted this:

We cannot claim to have moved from apartheid and its legacy if we do not actively seek to change the policies it put in place in as far as language use in classrooms is concerned.

In this extract, the participant explains that apartheid is still alive and gripping the nation because the policies that were put in place during the apartheid era on how languages must be used in education are still, to a greater extent, being enforced or practised. Through exposure to multilingual pedagogies, the participant began to question the language policies that govern classroom practices 30 years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa. Although a multilingual LiEP was adopted at democracy, the use of English or Afrikaans as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT) or mediums of instruction (MOI) prevailed. Alexander (1999) observed that even after democracy, the dead hand of apartheid continued to have a stifling grip on how languages were used in education. To date, local Indigenous languages remain marginalised, and they are not used as LoLTs or MOIs. There is still systemic monolingualism at all levels in education in South Africa. In corroboration, another participant noted:

The LiEP has regrettably not been realised in our South African schools, and English as the predominant language of instruction is currently dominating our multilingual classrooms, and educators play an integral role in bridging the gap as pedagogical choices which promote multilingualism serve South African learners far more than prohibiting their funds of knowledge.

The participant bemoans the failure of the LiEP to address the issue of language use in education. They use the word "regrettably" to describe the dismal failure of the implementation of the multilingual policy as English still enjoys dominance in classrooms everywhere in South Africa. They go on to explain that teachers have the power to correct this by choosing to teach using multilingual teaching pedagogies. This is in tandem with the view that the stances that teachers take can help them design lessons that are inclusive of the learners' multiple ways of being (Kleyn & García, 2019).

Multilingual Stances

The current study was an intervention that set out to assess if prolonged exposure to multilingual strategies would impact teacher multilingual stances in teaching multilingual learners. The teachers indicated a willingness to be agents of change from the monolingual teaching practices to a full embrace of translanguaging in their classrooms. Another three excerpts from participants are good examples of this shift:

I believe I have a duty to uphold and maintain the diverse linguistic practices and cultures brought about by learners.

Here, the participant takes it upon themselves to make sure they value their students' multiple linguistic practices and cultural diversities. The participant makes this declaration as one making a pledge, as highlighted by the statement "I have a duty to uphold and maintain." This indicates a high degree of commitment to change and signifies a complete revolution in the participant's attitude towards how languages will be treated in their classroom. The participants view themselves anew. They see themselves as playing an important role in engaging with the learners multilingually. Another observes that:

The teacher plays an integral role in bridging the gap and [engaging] their class into pedagogical choices that promote multilingualism by choosing to move from being a linguistic villain to a linguistic hero.

In this excerpt, the participant realises that as the teacher, they should play a pivotal role as an agent of change, encouraging multilingual practices within their classrooms. They use the phrase “from linguistic villain to linguistic hero” to indicate a deep understanding of the effects of adopting monolingual stances when working with multilingual learners. The participant views monolingual approaches as equal to the acts of villains and those who adopt multilingual stances as heroes. The student realises that they have a significant role—the ball is in their court to turn the situation around by making a conscious decision to promote multilingualism within their classroom for enhanced achievement among the learners. They see allowing learners to use all their language skills as a heroic act. In corroboration, a third participant notes:

I want to be the kind of teacher who chooses to build learners’ identities, allow[ing] learners to access their linguistic rights and experience academic success.

In this excerpt, the participant admits they are prepared to change from being a teacher who teaches using monolingual practices and chooses to acknowledge the learners’ ways of being, preserve their language rights, so they too can achieve at acceptable academic levels across the curriculum.

Implications for Translanguaging in the Global South

In this study, we modelled how an intentional orientation of translanguaging can be used to disrupt the marginalisation of local languages and multilingual speakers and how postgraduate student teachers as both subjects and objects of research can bring about tangible changes. For this, we drew on the tenets of a Southern theory of multilingualism: ubuntu translanguaging, which includes the logic of discontinuous continuation and the orchestra of the “I and we” denoting transversal incompleteness of languages in the process of meaning-making. The current study proposed to address whether prolonged intervention or induction with postgraduate student teachers’ epistemic beliefs and practices would change. The results demonstrate that this was an effective strategy to motivate practicing teachers to shift their practices. The students’ metacognitive reflections display a new stance in how they intend to teach—a stance burning with a desire to change the status quo of language use within their classrooms. The study shows that exposing teachers to pedagogical practices that encourage the use of multilingual teaching pedagogies is essential in breaking down traditional teaching methodologies, which were influenced by the “one-ness ideology” that advocates for the separation of languages in learning environments.

One thing that stands out in the results is that translanguaging was not interpreted by the postgraduate student teachers as a scaffold to realise the linear acquisitional goals for a Global North named language, that is, English (Makalela, 2016; Otheguy et al., 2015). Another finding from this study is that multilingualism is a norm in African classes, yet teachers are not fully equipped to teach learners with diverse multilingual profiles. The study has shown that if exposed to ubuntu methods of reflexivity and co-construction of knowledge to effectively teach multilingual learners, teachers have the willingness and capacity to adapt to the new pedagogies that are in line with the linguistic profiles of learners in the Global South classrooms where fluid and horizontal multilingualism is a constant norm in every day encounters (Brock-Utne, 2024; Makalela, 2022; Sah, 2017; Simpson, 2017). In line with this finding, institutions of higher learning must respond by preparing teachers who are fully equipped with skills on how best to teach these learners. It appears that teachers’ lived realities need to be affirmed through structured learning training on how to use pedagogical practices they already have with their learners, as modelled in this postgraduate class. In this regard, translanguaging thus becomes a tool to help decolonise classroom practices by enabling learners to walk on the path of becoming knowledgeable and knowledge creators (García, 2020; Madiba, 2024; Wong, 2024).

Conclusion

This study sought to investigate whether postgraduate student teachers' epistemic beliefs about translanguaging would change, specifically through a Global South lens. The findings demonstrate that an intentional translanguaging intervention effectively empowers teachers to fundamentally shift their epistemic beliefs and become proactive agents for change within their classrooms. This transformative process directly addresses the critical gap identified in the literature regarding the preparation of postgraduate teachers to effectively navigate and leverage multilingualism in diverse educational settings. The intervention proved instrumental in fostering a heightened awareness of pervasive systemic monolingualism, leading participants to critically reflect on their prior practices, which some candidly described as contributing to "linguistic genocide." Most importantly, this shift extended beyond mere recognition, cultivating a deep appreciation for translanguaging as a powerful tool for language maintenance, ensuring epistemic access for multilingual learners, and ultimately alleviating the "pain" inflicted by traditional monolingual approaches. Participants developed robust multilingual stances, expressing a strong commitment to integrating learners' full linguistic repertoires and advocating for culturally relevant pedagogical choices.

Therefore, it is demonstrably possible to work with teachers and effectively break the entrenched boundaries of monolingualism. Grounding translanguaging as a disruptive pedagogy against the "one-ness ideology" is not merely beneficial but is key for Global South contexts, where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. To truly tease out the complexities of multilingualism, teachers must be able to see language from the view of the user (the learner) in tandem with ubuntu translanguaging. This framework, positing infinite relations of dependency where one language is incomplete without another, offers a profound and holistic understanding of linguistic interaction. It challenges the Western hegemonic view that often positions indigenous languages as mere scaffolds to dominant languages, usually colonial languages, instead of valorising the rich, integrated linguistic tapestry that learners bring to the classroom.

The implications of this study are far-reaching for teacher education programmes, particularly in the Global South. We advocate for comprehensive curricular reforms that move beyond superficial acknowledgements of multilingualism to embed critical translanguaging pedagogies, informed by Southern theories like ubuntu, at their core. Such reforms should prioritise practical training and reflective practices that enable teachers to develop a confident and agentive translanguaging stance. Furthermore, policymakers and university administrators must recognise and actively support these pedagogical shifts, ensuring that institutional frameworks foster, rather than hinder, the implementation of inclusive multilingual practices. More critical courses and research documenting achievements of locally conceived and interpreted versions of translanguaging are needed to advance translanguaging as a theory and practice from the Global South perspectives. Future research could explore the long-term impact of such interventions on student outcomes, investigate the scalability of ubuntu translanguaging across different educational levels, and examine the role of collaborative professional development models in sustaining these transformative practices.

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An Insightful Look Into Mathematics Teachers' Navigation of Indigenisation as a Pedagogic Approach: A Contribution Toward Decolonisation⁴

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Abstract

The teaching of mathematics amidst the rising influence of globalisation in South Africa's basic education has come at the expense of the possibility of integrating local and Indigenous knowledge systems (LIKS) in the classroom. The scholarship of indigenisation reveals that mathematics teachers are confronted with pedagogical impediments that hinder a decolonised view informed by LIKS. Not much is currently understood about how mathematics teachers navigate these impediments during curriculum implementation, especially in rural areas. The Southern Theory underpinned the study because it advocates for the democratisation of marginalised Indigenous knowledges. This paper seeks to provide pedagogical insights into mathematics teachers' experiences during the integration of LIKS in their classrooms. A qualitative research approach was employed within an interpretivist paradigm. The study relied on an exploratory research methodology wherein nine participants were purposively sampled from the rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Data were generated through focus group discussions. The findings identified fundamental dimensions that hinder the implementation of LIKS although the participants appeared to have had sufficient pedagogical insights required for such integration. In conclusion, for an effective decolonisation of mathematics education, the implementation of the curriculum needs to be flexible to allow for the possibility of LIKS.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, decolonisation, indigenisation, mathematics teachers, rural areas

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⁴ Ethical clearance number: 0475 by the NMU Research Ethics Committee-Human (HREC-H)

Introduction

The South African government, through its policy of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) (Department of Science and Technology, 2008), has expressed its desire to recognise, promote, develop, and protect the country's rich IKS. This position appears to be at odds with other policy imperatives, which have insidiously embraced a homogenous culture through globalisation, in so doing, posing a challenge to South Africa's aspirations for IKS education. This anomaly has materialised in the teaching of mathematics in South Africa's classrooms, especially in rural areas where teachers are often conflicted with issues of language, appropriate examples, and how it could be used to incorporate learners' real-life experiences. In this article, we understand IKS, including in mathematics, as knowledge, skills, and practices that originated in distant generations of Indigenous peoples, and traditional methods that stemmed from a process of experimental learning (Mlotshwa & Tsakeni, 2024). Meanwhile, indigenisation is a transformative practice of knowledge creation that involves integrating local and Indigenous knowledge systems (LIKS) into the daily life encounters of learning and teaching to enrich individuals' thoughts and emotions regarding their cultural ways of being (Dlakavu et al., 2022; Madimabe et al., 2022). Indigenisation, therefore, positions Indigenous ways of being as a fundamental element of the learning process, fostering a closer link between LIKS, cultural legacy, and personal identity. Indigenisation can be viewed in several ways as a process that encourages a culturally responsive curriculum through the needs, knowledge, and traditions of local communities (Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022). Indigenisation can also be described as a phenomenon that encompasses the incorporation of Indigenous people's knowledge, heritage, culture, and traditional ways of knowing, to the extent that they become a fundamental part of the identity of the educational institutions (Adams, 2025; Madlela, 2024). These two views are essential for the teaching of mathematics because they encompass how teacher could navigate the curriculum expectations in their teaching.

Recognising the growing international commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education that promotes inclusive and equitable education for all), the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2011) has taken a deliberate decision to position cultural diversity as a central foundation of its educational policy approach. This policy has also been used to advocate for the teaching of Indigenous mathematics at a TVET college (Madimabe et al., 2022). The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for mathematics acknowledges the benefits of integrating LIKS into mathematics concepts for the promotion of educational methods that align with learners' socio-cultural backgrounds (DBE, 2011). Based on this, the dominance of Western epistemology in South Africa's mathematics curricula needs to be examined from the perspectives of teachers to articulate Indigenous knowledges that align with the experiences of learners, especially those in the rural areas (Chahine & de Beer, 2021; Jojo, 2023).

There is a global advocacy for the application and the integration of LIKS into the education curriculum; however, the teaching of secondary school mathematics continues to remain largely abstract and decontextualised for most South African learners, thereby failing to reflect their rich cultural and historical context (Chahine & de Beer, 2021; Garcia-Olp et al., 2022). The absence of LIKS in mathematics teaching results in epistemological dissonance, particularly for learners from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ngololo & Kanandjebo, 2024). Learners often struggle to reconcile their prior knowledge gained at home, which is grounded in Indigenous and community-based practices, with the school curriculum knowledge and concepts, which limits conceptual understanding and meaningful classroom engagements (Josua et al., 2022). The effectiveness of classroom teaching is inherently shaped by environment-specific factors associated with LIKS, which eventually contribute to a better understanding of mathematical concepts (Mandikonza, 2019). The importance of supporting teachers to

enhance their understanding of the cultural and Indigenous knowledge of the communities they teach has been well explored (Aikenhead, 1996; D'Ambrosio, 2001; Maxwell, 2013; Nkopodi & Mosimege, 2009; Ogunniyi, 2004). For these scholars, mathematics teachers need to appropriately use IKS and not rely only on theoretical knowledge of mathematics but also on the pedagogical enhancement of concept acquisition.

Several features have been identified as affecting teachers' abilities to plan inclusively while indigenising their classroom practices, including teachers' biographies, unwillingness to change, and unpreparedness for indigenisation (Boice et al., 2021; Jacobs, 2015; Mudaly, 2018). For example, Jacobs (2015) identified that the most common and important influences on teachers' ability to indigenise classroom practices are age, highest educational qualification, and experience in teaching the respective subjects. Additionally, Mudaly (2018), Seehawer (2018), and Govender and Mudzamiri (2022) highlighted that the challenge emanates from mathematics teachers' misinterpretation and disengagement with the principles contained in the CAPS document because it lacks clarity on content-related IKS. Thus, these authors have shed light on the personal and contextual constraints that affect teachers' ability to innovate and implement teaching practices that are culturally inclusive. These findings demonstrate an immediate requirement for customised teacher training, detailed educational standards, and institutional backing to enable mathematics teachers to deliver Indigenous teaching approaches (Kadonsi et al., 2023). The implementation of Indigenous teaching approaches requires instructional materials that enable a merge of traditional mathematical teaching methods and learners' IKS (Photo & McKnight, 2024).

Over the past two decades, research has highlighted the importance of indigenising mathematics pedagogy as a means to create inclusive learning environments, particularly in South Africa (Muttaqiin et al., 2021). Daniel et al. (2022) explained the essential nature of IKS incorporation into mathematics learning through Indigenous instruction. Similarly, Ilyas et al. (2021) emphasised that IKS enables learners to access their multicultural understanding and past experiences, thereby creating more purposeful learning environments. More specifically, Photo and McKnight (2024) argued that not only does indigenising the mathematics pedagogies make learning more relevant and meaningful, but it also bridges the persistent gap between traditional Western mathematics education and learners' everyday experiences. However, due to limited systematic support and professional development opportunities, mathematics teachers face profound challenges in navigating the quest for indigenisation (Beatty & Clyne, 2024; Maqoqa & Mvenene, 2023).

The importance of a relationship between the government's policies, models of the curriculum, and integration of Indigenous knowledge in learning is gaining traction, partly due to the emergence of the decolonisation discourse. For instance, the study of Makumane and Ngcobo (2021) revealed that the Lesotho curriculum reviews are intended to deal with the socio-economic development of the country in terms of education, indicating that certain key aspects remain underserved in their model of education, which has the potential to affect the curriculum evolution. Thus, the challenges surrounding the integration of IKS into curricula of education in South Africa may be impacted by the absence or the slow pace of government commitment and study material, such as textbooks and assessment criteria, which lack the inclusion of contextualised content that embraces cultural diversity (Madlela, 2024).

This exploratory study seeks to provide an understanding of how mathematics teachers navigate the indigenisation process within their pedagogical practices. This is done through exploring secondary school mathematics teachers' perceptions and pedagogical insights regarding the integration of IKS for the indigenisation of mathematics pedagogy as an approach. In addition, the study intends to shed light on the support needed by secondary school mathematics teachers to catalyse the integration of IKS for the

indigenisation of the mathematics pedagogy. Due to the study's exploratory nature and contextual limitations, this research does not seek to generalise findings across all secondary schools located in the rural areas of South Africa. Instead, it offers an in-depth, situated analysis of how the integration of LIKS for the indigenisation of mathematics pedagogy interacts with the realities of the secondary schools located in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape.

The paper is organised into seven sections. Following this introduction, the next two sections present the problem statement, and the theoretical framework, focusing on the key principles of the Southern Theory and its relevance to the indigenisation of the mathematics classroom instruction for a meaningful and culturally responsive pedagogy. The methodology of this study then follows, detailing the usage of focus group discussions as the data collection instrument. The findings then highlight key themes relating to the indigenisation of the mathematics pedagogy, followed by a discussion of the challenges and support needed by secondary school mathematics teachers for a successful integration of IKS. The paper concludes with a summary of key insights, theoretical contributions, and practical recommendations, along with suggestions for future research.

Problem Statement

The South African Department of Basic Education, through the 2024 National Senior Certificate Examination Report, highlighted mathematics as an important gateway subject at the secondary level. Although achieving a new record in the matric pass rate at 87.3% for the class of 2024, an alarming trend is emerging of a significant decrease in enrolment for mathematics. The annual data show that from 2023 to 2024, mathematics enrolment declined by 12,338, going from 268,100 learners to 255,762 learners. The decline in mathematics enrolment has indicated systemic problems that particularly affect learners, especially those from rural areas because they are the most affected and under-resourced contexts. One of the key structural challenges contributing to this decline is the uneven distribution of mathematics teachers across South African provinces, which often depends on school size rather than educational need. The Minister of Basic Education, Ms. Gwarube, in Mzekandaba (2025) stated that 464 public schools, many of which are in rural areas, do not offer mathematics because of a lack of resources or a lack of learner demand. The KwaZulu-Natal Province has most of these schools (135), followed by the Eastern Cape (84), Limpopo (78), Western Cape (61), Northwest and Gauteng (31), the Northern Cape Province (19), Free State (14), and Mpumalanga Province (11). By using school size as a basis for teacher allocation, the DBE inadvertently marginalises rural learners, many of whom are already disadvantaged by poor infrastructure, socio-economic hardship, and limited subject choices. This strategy limits learner access to vital career pathways in industry, engineering, medicine, and information and communications technology, and undermines the country's commitment to making mathematics a high-priority subject.

In an effort to address this problem, the DBE has scheduled various national projects such as the STEM Focus Schools Programme, the Mathematics, Science, and Technology Conditional Grant, partnership protocols with neighbouring countries, as well as continuing training of the teachers (Mzekandaba, 2025). Thus far, these efforts have not resulted in authentic actions, particularly in settings where inequalities are greatest. Much as DBE is responsive to the pertinence of mother tongue-based bilingual education (which is being phased in gradually by grade for improving instructional support and providing adequate class time), there is hardly any ongoing pragmatic effort being made to operationalise the integration of LIKS into the secondary school mathematics education (Jojo, 2023). Such disconnection between what is taught formally in mathematics curricula and the background knowledge of Indigenous learners limits the relevance of mathematics teaching and magnifies other issues of disengagement and diminished enrolment (Kadonsi et al., 2023). Several studies have been conducted on the teaching of mathematics, most of which have been focused on the use of technology, overcrowded classrooms,

support for teachers, and the need for more mathematics teachers in South Africa (Graham, 2023; Graham et al., 2021; Saal et al., 2025). Not much is known about how teachers navigate the indigenisation as a pedagogic approach in rural areas of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. In this paper, we intend to provide an insightful look into mathematics teachers' experiences on how they navigate their understanding of indigenisation as a pedagogic approach.

Theoretical Framework

The paper draws on the Southern Theory, which fundamentally opposes the hegemonic position of Northern Theory within the discourse of postcolonial curriculum revisions (Chimbi & Jita, 2022). It incorporates previously overlooked IKS together with anti-imperialist resistance movements (Chakrabarti, 2023). Southern Theory opposes the claims of dominant Northern theorists that theory production is limited to the metropolis (Connell, 2014). The theory intends to provide a framework to reconfigure the basis of a fresh philosophical perspective, which would deconstruct Western traditional educational structures to make way for Indigenous theoretical frameworks to lead educational transformation in schools (Chimbi & Jita, 2022). The Southern Theory characterises an innovative interdisciplinary field encompassing academic theories, knowledge, and artistic expressions in the Southern Hemisphere (Swartz et al., 2024). Of particular focus is the perceived disjunction between predominant methodologies of knowledge generated from the Northern Hemisphere and the lived realities of individuals in the Southern Hemisphere, most of whom still experience a colonised curriculum (Dwyer & Buckle, 2022). Scholars such as Abebe et al. (2022) and Chaka (2022) have gravitated toward scholarship of the Southern Theory to confront the limitations of conventional educational research frameworks in order to probe educational issues affecting marginalised communities' voices. In doing so, the theory provides a framework through which the Western knowledge paradigm can be challenged while simultaneously being inclusive of Indigenous ways of being and doing, thereby contributing to a broader decolonisation agenda (Mukherjee, 2019; Santos, 2018). The Southern Theory is one of the avenues that could assist in understanding how teachers could navigate the process of indigenising their mathematics curriculum.

Three tenets underpin the Southern Theory: the decolonisation of knowledge (DK), the love for humanity (LH), and the promotion of inclusive education (PIE) as can be seen in Figure 1. The DK advocates for active engagement of stakeholders in the decolonisation of education by critically examining and challenging colonial legacies, biases, and power structures regarding academic content, methodologies, perceptions, and prejudices (Chakrabarti, 2023; Connell, 2014).

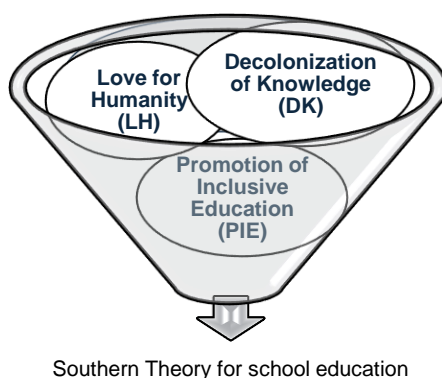
The Inclusion of Southern Perspectives in Social Science, Teaching, and Education

Due to the underpinning advocacy of the DK, teachers and scholars can encourage and envisage the indigenisation of the mathematics curriculum, especially in rural areas where the language of teaching and learning is mainly through local and Indigenous languages. The tenet of LH has positioned itself as a potential driving force for teachers' pedagogical development, embraced by the concept of love and inclusivity. The concept of LH in mathematics education has recently gained prominence amongst scholars such as Scott (2022) and Moreno-Pino et al. (2022). This prominence is attributed to a growing consensus that education should be intricately intertwined with humane values. This perspective underscores the crucial role of such values in shaping collective perceptions of mathematics and its pedagogy. Thus, LH in mathematics education requires collaboration, positive perceptions, context sensitivity, and humanistic professional pedagogical approaches. PIE has benefited from several studies in the advancement of inclusive mathematics education (Acharya, 2020; Malapane, 2022; Su & Yang, 2023). Aspects of inclusivity in mathematics that have promoted indigenisation include curriculum design, alignment with learners'

real-world experiences, mathematical modelling, incorporation of Indigenous knowledge, and education for sustainable development.

Figure 1

The Southern Theory: Researchers' Construction, Guided by Connell's (2007) Philosophical Perspectives



These three tenets (DK, LH, and PIE) have all provided a unique but essential dimension to the indigenisation of mathematics because they offer valuable perspectives on promoting inclusivity, relevance, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness for teachers to navigate the process of indigenisation in their respective classrooms.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research method was used to gain an insightful look into mathematics teachers' navigation of indigenisation in their classrooms. In this qualitative inquiry, we focused on understanding the different realities of teacher experience of our participants by making sense of their experiences during the integration of LKS in mathematics pedagogy (Hatch, 2023). Our approach was framed within an interpretivist paradigm because it allowed us to "view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants" (Sathorar & Blignaut, 2021, p. 9). This implies that knowledge of teachers' navigation of the indigenisation process exists as a social construct (Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025). Nine participants were purposively selected for the study, consisting of Sesotho-speaking Grade 8 mathematics teachers from rural public, Quintile 1–3 secondary schools in the Alfred Nzo District, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Table 1 indicates the biographical data of each purposively selected participant. The study relied on focus group discussions for data generation (Akyildiz, & Ahmed, 2021). We used focus group discussions because they helped us delve into the intricate nuances of the indigenisation of mathematics by our participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time.

Table 1
Participants' Biographical Data

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Highest Qualifications	Nature of Employment	Years of Teaching Experience	Approximate number of learners in a classroom
Mokoena	40	Female	PGCE	Post L1	17	50 & more
Mosia	36	Female	B Ed	Post L1	09	36–50
Mochela	26	Female	B Ed	Post L1	01	50 & more
Mokebe	44	Female	Dip in Edu	Post L1	19	36–50
Mothepane	32	Male	PGCE	Post L2	09	50 & more
Monareng	50	Female	Dip in Edu	Post L2	22	36–50
Moleleki	55	Male	Dip in Edu	Post L2	30	36–50
Mokubung	27	Male	B Ed	Post L1	03	50 & more
Motaung	46	Female	Dip in Edu	Post L2	18	36–50

Dip in Edu-Diploma in Education, B Ed-Bachelor of Education, PGCE- Post Graduate Certificate in Education

Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the generated data. Thematic analysis is best known for its ability to classify, evaluate, and interpret patterns of meaning into a broader terrain of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We analysed the experiences of our participants by first coding the generated data, categorising it, and interpreting it for meaning. This systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis was deliberately adopted to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the study's findings. Ethics approval to conduct the research was sought and granted by the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee-Human and the Provincial Department of Basic Education.

Findings of the Study

To understand teachers' pedagogical insights into how they navigate the integration of LIKS during the teaching of mathematics, the following themes emerged from the data:

- 1) Teachers' understanding of the integration of LIKS into the secondary school mathematics curriculum,
- 2) Teachers' acumen on the indigenisation of the mathematics pedagogy,
- 3) Positioning Indigenous games in the Grade 8 mathematics classroom, and
- 4) Perceived challenges in navigating indigenisation.

Teachers' Understanding of the Link Between LIKS and Technology in the Mathematics Curriculum

Participants' understanding of the link between the mathematics taught in their classroom and the usage of technology when teaching mathematics demonstrated a sense of comprehension needed to implement an indigenised-oriented curriculum. One participant said:

I can say, my understanding of the link between LIKS and mathematics, is like linking learners' understanding in the classroom to their cultures. Maybe like Sesotho games such as Kgathi would really help in terms of the counting, Sine and Cosine graphs because when you jump there you can count how many times, and the swinging of the rope representing the period, and shape of the trigonometry graphs. (Mokebe)

The participant appears to be linking her cultural understanding with how she navigates the teaching of mathematics in her classroom. Although she still relies on English to articulate mathematical language, the link between the two concepts (LIKS and Western articulation of mathematical concepts) has been constructed in the participant's classroom. Another participant said:

My understanding is that when we teach maths, we should make examples that learners can understand, maybe by also adding technology to further show the examples, and then these examples can be about any form of cultures, backgrounds, and things around all of us. (Moleleki)

These participants' experiences invalidate the belief that LIKS and technological tools work solely in isolation from formal mathematics classroom instruction because the two resources can work together to provide culturally appropriate pedagogical approaches that enhance the secondary school mathematics conceptual understanding. Nwokocho and Legg-Jack (2024) echoed this view by stating that there are multiple ways of integrating LIKS and technology to enhance the mathematics classroom practice. Meanwhile, a participant stated that they have not attempted to implement any of these linkages because of certain problems prevailing in the school:

Colleagues, I believe all these are recommended by the department for us to do in our classroom. I, for one, have not done any linking of LIKS or technology. I teach mathematics, the way I have been teaching it, and my learners understand, but I think making learning more fun and entertaining can play a vital role in making the learners understand and grasp the concepts easier. (Monareng)

Some participants expanded on the application of the link between LIKS, technological tools, and mathematics classroom instruction through the usage of the Sesotho cultural games, for example:

Yes, it is teaching maths concepts and making examples that are visible, practical, maybe like the Sesotho games, like my peer have stated, as for technology, maybe showing like shapes, teaching probability, and others using technology. (Mochela)

Sharing a similar view was Mothepane:

Honestly, it is important that we priorities the development of learners' understanding of mathematics, especially at the introduction level, Grade 8. I agree with the examples mentioned by previous speakers, we can use cultural games, as we know, challenges we experience, especially on the side of technology.

It is evident that there is a relationship between LIKS and technology, which could be used for better concept learning of mathematics and learner involvement. Participants seemed to be embracing the educational value of combining digital tools with cultural examples to help learners understand abstract mathematical ideas through contextual learning. Some participants reported that their classrooms lack implementation of these connections because they face difficulties with inadequate technology access, along with traditional teaching methods and insufficient training. This theme illustrates that linking LIKS, Grade 8 mathematics concepts, and technology received positive feedback from participants (Daniel et al., 2022).

Teachers' Acumen in the Indigenisation of the Mathematics Pedagogy

To ensure that the research fully captures the participants' understanding and viewpoint of the indigenisation of mathematics, the discussion also explored views on whether the indigenisation of mathematics has the potential to bring about change in learner performance. Participants responded affirmatively, both through non-verbal gestures such as the thumbs-up, clapping of hands, and nodding of heads features on online interviews. Participants understood the indigenisation of mathematics as "teaching mathematics concepts and making examples that are visible, practical, maybe like the Sesotho games, like my peer has stated" (Mochela). Similarly, Mokebe added, "is like linking learners' understanding in the classroom mathematics to their cultures." Motaung expressed her view of the indigenisation of the mathematics concepts, stating it "is an approach that allows our learners to tap into their life experiences while learning." The view of another participant was:

My understanding is that when we teach maths, we should make examples that they can understand, examples can be about any form of cultures, backgrounds, and things around all of us. (Moleleki)

Some participants acknowledged that the implementation of the indigenisation quest is not an individual responsibility but for teachers as a collective. This view was shared by Mosia:

I believe that if we can work as a collective to include our unique cultural practices, such as dance, games, and important rules attached, artefacts, and all others, can help our learners to grasp the challenging mathematics concept easily in class.

Sharing a similar view were:

Of course, because when you look at our cultures and heritage, as South Africans, we are an arithmetic nation. And by that, I mean that we are a nation that loves seeing our diverse identities all that we do, so LIKS can have a positive impact on learner performance. (Monareng)

In general, as teachers teaching in the rural areas of EC, we need to change the formal traditional ways of teaching whereby it is just the teacher who is disseminating the concepts to the learners but use other ways like indigenising our teaching to include all forms of knowledge. (Mothepane)

Mokoena's remarked:

As South Africans, we embody different forms of IKS, thus we need to collaborate and be guided professionally, through professional development programmes and trainings, so that as teachers we are on the same wavelength.

Thus the indigenisation of mathematics classroom instruction is very much needed and a vital aspect within the South African rural contexts. Participants indicated that because there are different forms of knowledge that can be used to change the status quo of mathematics education, professional support for rural teachers should form an essential component of teachers' guidance. In addition, participants' acumen towards the indigenisation of mathematics highlighted the importance of the different ways in which the indigenisation process can be implemented, such as appropriating cultural games to mathematical concepts (Moleleki), dances and important rules attached (Mosia), and association of different cultural artefacts with mathematical principles (Mochela), which are available in the local communities through the teaching of mathematics. This indicates that the participants had sufficient understanding of the indigenisation of the mathematics pedagogies processes. Based on this

understanding, some participants provided a descriptive translation of mathematical concepts into the learners' Indigenous language for better understanding.

Positioning Indigenous Games in the Grade 8 Mathematics Classroom Practice

The positioning of Indigenous games is a potential way to integrate LIKS into mathematics pedagogy. LIKS can be understood as different forms of knowledge, skills, and practices that originated in distant generations of Indigenous peoples, and traditional methods that stemmed from a process of experimental learning. This analysis tapped into the participants' understanding of the forms of cultural games that could be employed when teaching Grade 8 mathematics. Some participants' responses on how they use games in their pedagogy were as follows:

For me, I would suggest the playing of Indigenous games. As I know that these games (activities) have a lot of benefits, such as learners' ability to focus and obey the game rules and keep to them. Like when playing *diketo* [jackstones], their hands and eyes must work together to prevent losing the stone, and these experiences are also needed in the comprehension of mathematics concepts. (Mokebe)

The participants also explained how technology supports enhanced pedagogical practices and increased student involvement. Digital tools provide a pathway to introduce native games using visual materials, which extends learning beyond school hours. This is how participants shared their experience:

Yes, I have also heard that learners can learn multiple functions from playing Indigenous games such as *kgathi* [skipping rope]. Through this game, learners can identify geometric shapes with the aim of interpreting, converting, and integrating them into mathematics word problems. (Moleleki)

To save time, at times learners can be shown images of such games through technology and then be tasked to go and play at home in their own time. In that way, learners will be learning while having fun, which is an element needed in maths. (Mochela)

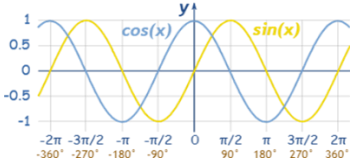
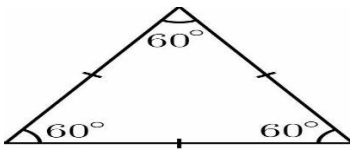

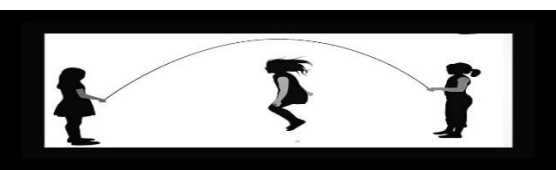
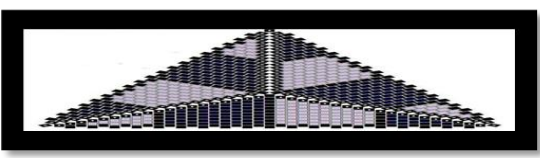
Learning patterns, shapes, and their properties, including other mathematical geometry taught in the classroom through concrete pictorial visuals and practical strategies such as *difaha* [beadwork], streets, and house patterns, can improve learners' visualisation skills and assist learners relate the classroom taught knowledge to their everyday lives. (Mokubung)

The incorporation of LIKS into the teaching of Grade 8 mathematics concepts, as stipulated in CAPS (DBE, 2011), can provide beneficial approaches for educational development through traditional knowledge integration. Through Mokebe, learners experience the opportunity to play traditional games like jackstones, which simultaneously develop the learner's concentration skills while teaching numbers, counting, mathematical rules, and coordination skills that align with nuances of mathematical comprehension. Additionally, Moleleki reported that skipping rope can enable learners to identify geometric forms as well as use them for mathematical problem solving. Furthermore, Mochela stated that these activities do not necessarily have to be played; showing images of educational games via technology can allow learners to learn independently and enjoy their educational experience in their own time. Mokubung described concrete pictorial visuals and practical strategies, including beadwork and patterns from streets and houses, which can help learners develop their visualisation skills while creating real-world connections. The collected intelligence demonstrates that IKS in the form of cultural games has the

potential to generate meaningful learning experiences that are both engaging and aligned with learners' surroundings (Table 2).

Table 2

Linking Some Grade 8 Mathematics Concepts From CAPS (DBE, 2011) to Categories of IKS

Mathematics content in CAPS	Indigenous practices/games/artefacts
<p>Cosine & Sine Distribution Law</p> $a(b + c) = ab + ac$ $a(b - c) = ab - ac$  <p>Equilateral Triangle</p> 	<p>Jackstones/ Diketo</p>  <p>Skipping Rope/Kgathi</p>  <p>Beadwork /Difaha</p> 

The above represents a visual conceptualisation of Grade 8 mathematics content in relation to LIKS, captured through the aid of technology. The participants were able to identify this link during their teaching, and used games as sources of illustration for a better acquisition of mathematical concepts, as noted in CAPS. This framework revealed that IKS is not marginal but profoundly mathematical, providing alternate roads to intuiting the concepts of number systems in the form of algebraic expression, trigonometry, and geometric reasoning. The inclusion of such examples in the teaching process would contribute to reaffirming the African cultural identity of learners and be a step towards changing curriculum implementation to be more humanising and relevant to learners. However, effective implementation of such links is contingent upon a wider policy review to include textbook design, teacher training, and measurement requirements, which should establish an enabling environment to allow teachers to deeply institute IKS pedagogy into their practice without viewing it as a supplement or add-on of their practice.

Perceived Challenges in Navigating Indigenisation

From participants' discursive reflections on the potential difficulties that mathematics teachers often encounter when implementing innovative strategies in the teaching of mathematics (Madlela, 2024; Meeran, 2024), strategies such as LIKS and the teaching of mathematics were identified. Participants reported having difficulties finding culturally appropriate resources, organising packed classrooms, and finding the time to make meaningful content adaptations. For example, Mochela stated that:

For me, my main challenge is time, overcrowding, and identifying appropriate resources and materials that would be suitable for the Grade 8 curriculum and that link to our Indigenous learners' background. It is important that we use resources that are culturally appropriate to the school community's background. Standard curriculum materials like the textbooks do not represent learners' cultural backgrounds that links to how they engage in learning.

These difficulties are not only pedagogical but also structural and epistemological, highlighting the complexities involved in aligning curriculum delivery with learners' cultural contexts. This often requires teachers to think imaginatively and vis-à-vis the context. This becomes even more difficult where resources are not easily or readily available. This is how one participant shared her experience of the challenges:

Yes . . . I also see that the absence of teaching materials which match my reality as an urgent challenge, because most educational resources focus on Western mathematical concepts, making it challenging to engage native learners. So, finding or creating educational materials with traditional knowledge and perspectives demands additional time for development. (Moleleki)

The participants' reflections highlight the systematic barriers that prevent them from using culturally inclusive, contextualised, and participatory mathematics lessons. Another participant explained that:

The main challenge is the resources. Presently, our learners are often passive... only one or two learners participate, ask questions, so to save time, I continue with the lesson. I find myself talking the entire period, emphasising the important points of the concepts without letting the learners discuss and participate in their learning process. (Mokebe)

Mokebes' reflections share that learners become passive when under time pressure, so they tend to rely on teacher-based instruction. Using Southern Theory lens, our analysis is that teachers find the PIE to be difficult and impractical based on their current operational limitations (Malapane, 2022). From the participants' perspective, learner-centred approaches are affected by systemic factors, including time constraints and classroom overcrowding (Nwokocha & Legg-Jack, 2024). Additionally, these reflections demonstrate an integration challenge between content knowledge and technological pedagogical knowledge. The teacher controls the subject material but does not have the essential tools or time, which prevents the activation of meaningful teaching methods that adapt to learners' different contexts. This is how a participant encapsulated her experiences of the challenge:

Our challenges are time, managing large classes because of infrastructure predicaments, and making it difficult to provide individual support. And for me personally, content-related trainings, for simpler ways of indigenising our teachings and the usage of technology, is needed. (Monareng)

Monareng's further utterances highlight the overlapping challenges mentioned by other participants, such as time constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and limited training in both content and technology integration, for example:

making it difficult to provide individual support . . . trainings for simpler ways of indigenising our teachings and the usage of technology are needed.

For Monareng, to successfully incorporate technology and LIKS into mathematics teaching, there is a deficiency in technological pedagogical knowledge and technological content knowledge. This reflection highlights the common epistemic and infrastructure marginalisation in Global South contexts as purported by the Southern Theory (Swartz et al., 2024). To counter the dominance of Western pedagogical norms and promote context-responsive teaching, it is necessary to build capacity locally, as indicated by the call for training in Indigenous and technological strategies (Garcia-Olp et al., 2022). This need for training was echoed by a participant when they explained that:

On the point of the need for training, I think all stakeholders involved should be capacitated on this process. Because this change process requires shared and communicated understanding from the learners' side, the teachers, and the parents, to avoid resistance and

opposed adoption. Remember, this Western way of teaching has been done for decades, and I think trust for change must be achieved from all angles and the entire school community. (Mosia) Mosia stressed that adequate training becomes essential for everybody who participates in the shift towards native teaching practices between teachers and learners:

This change process requires shared and communicated understanding . . . trust for change must be achieved from all angles and the entire school community.

From the participants' experiences, we understand how collaborative pedagogy brings educational change from classrooms into the educational ecosystem of the local school community as an aspect of indigenisation. Pedagogical changes that maintain success and longevity require every party involved to know and support the methodologies with sufficient confidence. It is evident that the participants are confronted with multiple obstacles that prohibit them from attempting to use creativity and innovation in their classroom instructions (Nwokocha and Legg-Jack, 2024). The main obstacles that secondary mathematics teachers face include insufficient time, overcrowded teaching spaces, limited resources, as well as insufficient content-related professional development training. The passiveness of learners poses difficulties to teachers because learners frequently avoid class interactions. In brief, the existing problems in secondary school mathematics education show a need for improved resource distribution, improved infrastructure for fewer learners per class, and dedicated training to link content, LIKS, and technology for enhanced mathematics teaching (Meeran, 2024).

In light of these challenges, research demonstrates that rural mathematics teachers turn to pragmatic and collaborative learning, resource-sharing, and school-based professional learning communities (Medequillo & Gallardo, 2024). They use community resources as well as creative repurposing of teaching (Algonés et al., 2024; Yi et al., 2024). In combination, these strategies embody resilience, agency, and innovation of teachers—their capabilities to maintain a practice and establish adaptive spaces that meet the needs of learners with varying needs. It is thus important to fund and expand such initiatives in the reimagining of the mathematics pedagogy that is relevant and transformational to the context.

Discussion of the Findings

This study focused on how mathematics teachers navigate the indigenisation of the secondary school mathematics pedagogy so as to link it to the varied cultural elements of learners within their learning environments. Using Connells' Southern Theory as a lens, the study deduced that participants had positive perceptions towards the integration of LIKS for the indigenisation of the secondary school mathematics pedagogy as an appropriate approach. Furthermore, the participants' insightfulness of indigenisation was in accordance with the tenets of the theoretical framework underpinning this study. For example, some participants unpacked their understanding of indigenisation as linking learners' understanding in the classroom to their cultures (DK), making examples using forms of culture, such as Sesotho cultural games (PIE).

Drawing from the literature, these perspectives align with the PIE and DK, which are key tenets of the Southern Theory framework. Scholars such as Acharya (2020), Malapane (2022), and Su and Yang (2023) advocated for the promotion of inclusive and culturally responsive strategies, underscoring the importance of learning experiences in educational instruction. The participants' experiences offered valuable perspectives on promoting inclusivity, relevance, and cultural responsiveness in mathematics education, aligned with the objectives of the proposed study. These findings emphasise indigenisation as a vital approach through PIE in Southern Theory. Furthermore, these findings support and concur with the findings of Nxumalo and Mncube (2019), Mosimege (2020), Mabotja (2023), and Meeran (2024), affirming teachers' awareness of the need to incorporate cultural practices and indigenise the pedagogy.

Simultaneously, participants' responses, pertaining to their pedagogical insights into the indigenisation quest, revealed that participants are aware of the need to indigenise their teaching. However, participants reported challenges about pedagogy; at face value, these are endemic challenges that are current for most mathematics teachers working in schools located in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province. These challenges are issues understood to be the cause of the continued reliance on non-innovative, traditional ways of teaching. These issues ranged from classroom overcrowding and time allocation, non-prioritisation of teacher capacitation in schools located in rural settings, and the absence of guiding teaching resources that incorporate the integration of LIKS into diverse mathematics concepts.

With respect to the number of learners per class, participants indicated that five of the secondary school mathematics teachers handle classes with between 36–50 learners in a classroom. Furthermore, four teachers have classes with more than 50 learners each, whereas the South African national learner-teacher ratio policy is 33:1 (DBE, 2018). The findings from the discussions identified classroom overcrowding, shortage of LIKS-informed teaching resources, and the absence of professional development programmes that are grade- and concept-specific as the main obstacles for teaching localised and indigenised mathematics teaching methods. The participants' views highlighted these challenges as key to their not attempting to indigenise the mathematics pedagogy. Some schools do not have enough classrooms to split learners into smaller groups, making it difficult for teachers to plan for LIKS-linked lessons because of the assumption that innovative lessons are time-consuming. A view that is also epitomised in the works of Mpiti and Wambu (2023) and Maqoqa and Mvenene (2023), where overcrowding was viewed as a persistent problem mainly in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape and various areas of South Africa. Although in the current study, the main cause of overcrowding is attributed to a shortage of classrooms (infrastructure), Maqoqa and Mvenene (2023) argued that rurality is a context unattractive to many, thus, non-retention of qualified mathematics teachers results in overcrowded mathematics classes.

The study participants knowingly and unknowingly showed understanding of the practical benefits of LIKS integration in mathematics education, although the identified obstacles prohibit them from translating these benefits into classroom practice. Research participants concluded that teaching mathematics through cultural elements would enable learners to experience a meaningful and relevant understanding of the mathematics concepts taught. Thus, progress on the integration of LIKS and culturally responsive pedagogical strategies depends on the elimination of issues related to the availability of LIKS-informed resources, advancements in teacher competencies, and curriculum support formalities, like infrastructure.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored secondary school mathematics teachers' perceptions and pedagogical insights regarding integrating LIKS into mathematics pedagogy. The findings identified fundamental dimensions that hinder the integration of LIKS into the secondary school mathematics classrooms. The findings showed that mathematics teachers have positive perceptions and possess sufficient pedagogical insights required to integrate LIKS, however, they were able to unpack potential ways in which some Grade 8 mathematics concepts from CAPS could be linked to LIKS. Similarly, teachers expressed several impediments that prohibited the indigenisation of mathematics pedagogy and recommended ways to support them. The study demonstrates that faced with the challenge of the integration of LIKS into curriculum delivery, teachers tend to engage in pragmatic adaptive strategies that favour coping with the highlighted demands of the classroom environment. These strategies permit them to cope with the expectations of curriculum delivery but reflexively reduce the range of more forward-thinking and inclusive pedagogical actions. It points to the necessity of reinforcing professional development and curriculum support systems in a

manner that allows teachers to transition beyond coping strategies and toward any form that embraces and harnesses, as true, the power of Indigenous knowledge in mathematical learning.

It is recommended that mathematics teachers be provided with professional development programmes that are concept-specific and tailored toward the indigenisation of the pedagogy. Additionally, be provided with teaching resources such as grade-specific guidelines illustrating the practical implementations per concept per grade. Mathematics pedagogies that are culturally responsive and relevant to the learner's LKS in the classroom can enable a transformative learning environment that supports a greater connection to indigenised learning among learners. In conclusion, for effective contribution towards the decolonisation of mathematics education, the South African curriculum needs to be flexible to allow for the possibility of LKS. Accordingly, this study emphasises the prioritisation of professional development programmes that equip mathematics teachers with the knowledge and strategies necessary for the integration of LKS into the classroom pedagogical practices.

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Ubuntu Pedagogies as a Curriculum Practice to Reimagine Multilingualism in Higher Education Through African Communal Values: A South African Perspective

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Abstract

This systematic review study contributes to the ongoing debate about multilingualism in higher education. The study investigates how Indigenous pedagogies like ubuntu can be utilised as a curriculum practice to reimagine the concept of multilingualism through communal values. Rooted in ubuntu as a philosophy, the study aims to investigate the Global South perspectives that enable ubuntu as a curriculum practice strategy that can enable multilingualism in higher education. This qualitative systematic approach synthesised data obtained from secondary data. The search was informed by a research question designed through the PICo framework: “How do ubuntu pedagogies in South Africa (P) reimagine multilingualism (I) in higher education (Co)?” Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings extracted from the 12 articles of the study position ubuntu pedagogies as a valuable tool to advocate for multilingualism in higher education. Further, the findings reveal that ubuntu may create a learning environment that promotes Indigenous psychology and ontologies. These findings imply that higher education can be transformed to allow for pluriversity where multiple languages can be used to promote teaching and learning, and policymakers should translate ubuntu into practice rather than just a philosophy. The study concludes that ubuntu pedagogies offer a transformative lens through which multilingualism in higher education can be reimaged as a communal, inclusive, and decolonial curriculum practice. The study recommends that institutions of higher learning should include ubuntu pedagogies in the way teachers are trained, in teaching practice, and in policies on multilingual use. In addition, training should focus on discussing and applying the ubuntu teaching strategy, encouraging collaborative knowledge production.

Keywords: ubuntu pedagogies, curriculum practice, multilingualism, African communal values, decolonisation

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Introduction

Multilingualism in higher education seems to be a deeply contested issue, shaped by enduring colonial language hierarchies and the urgent pursuit of epistemic justice. Across diverse contexts over a decade, scholars have sought ways to shift monolingual pedagogies towards more inclusive and pluralistic models that affirm linguistic diversity (Antony-Newman, 2025; Bamgbose, 2014; Chen et al., 2022; Kiernan et al., 2017; Kubota, 2016). Ndofirepi (2016) highlighted the need to dismantle the coloniality of language by centring Indigenous knowledge systems, while Asfaha et al. (2023), writing from the Global South perspective, advocated for translanguaging pedagogies that legitimise the full spectrum of students' linguistic repertoires. Both reports recognised that language is far more than a communicative tool. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981) affirmed that language is a terrain for politics and a site of power, cultural survival, and identity. Ubuntu pedagogies can be used as a tool to dismantle colonial language hierarchies through Indigenous ontologies (Ngũgĩ, 1993).

Praeg (2008) defined ubuntu pedagogies as teaching and learning strategies that are African centred, rooted in the philosophy of ubuntu (I am because we are), advocating for the inclusion of African learning methods in mainstream education. This study views ubuntu pedagogies as tools for an African-centred narrative advocating for multilingualism in higher education and the promotion of communal learning. Tshelane (2022) defined curriculum practice as the process of designing a curriculum that informs the delivery of content, learning assessment, and a rudimentary process of developing instructors professionally. However, this study views curriculum practice as more than just content delivery or assessment of teaching and learning, but a deliberate effort to dismantle the colonial pedagogies that still predominantly inform the implementation of teaching and learning in higher education. The study investigates how ubuntu pedagogies can be used as a curriculum practice tool to promote multilingualism in higher education, using the South African perspective to enable communal values.

There have been various studies conducted regarding multilingualism in higher education. For instance, Sefotho (2022) demonstrated how ubuntu's ethos enables translanguaging practices that bridge home and academic languages in South African classrooms, enhancing cognitive engagement and cultural affirmation. Similarly, Chimbutane (2015) examined how Mozambique's bilingual education policies, while imperfect, have elevated marginalised languages by treating multilingualism as a shared asset rather than a deficit. In Sri Lanka, Canagarajah (2022) explored how universities embrace linguistic hybridity to resist English dominance, proposing *pedagogies of negotiation* that resonate with ubuntu's emphasis on relationality. Closer to home, Munyaradzi (2024) critiqued neoliberal language policies that commodify multilingualism, urging institutions to adopt ubuntu-informed frameworks that foreground equity over market efficiency.

Despite these significant contributions, few studies critically examined how ubuntu pedagogies might operationalise multilingualism as a curriculum practice, rather than leaving it as a policy aspiration (Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025). Neoliberal systems in higher education continue to privilege individualism and linguistic assimilation, thereby marginalising African communal values (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This review responds to that gap by asking the question using the population, interest, and context (PICo) framework (Cooke et al., 2012): "How can ubuntu pedagogies in South Africa (P) reimagine multilingualism (I) in higher education (Co) through communal curriculum practices?" The use of a PICo framework as a systematic review framework in qualitative social science was encouraged by Stern et al. (2014), who further differentiated the PICO framework (population, intervention, comparison, and outcome) from PICo when conducting a qualitative systematic review. On the other hand, Mphuthi et al. (2024) demonstrated how PICo could be used for social sciences in the higher education context. The study aims to respond to the research question: "To what extent can ubuntu pedagogies in South Africa be used as a curriculum practice strategy to advocate for multilingualism in higher education?"

Theoretical Framework

The theory guiding this study is ubuntu philosophy. Emanating from Bantu-speaking communities in Africa, Letseka (2012) claimed that ubuntu is about societal connectedness, sharing common values, and people believing in a collective well-being. This paradigm is best defined by an ethos, *motho ke motho ka batho* [I am because we are]. Ubuntu philosophy is deeply rooted in the belief of communal values and

indigenous psychology. Ubuntu emphasises showing compassion, respecting each other, working together, and believing that knowledge is co-created (Gade, 2011). Ubuntu as a teaching perspective challenges the sense of competition and individual progress found in teaching cultures of the West, thereby showing how learning happens as a result of people working together. Further, Ngubane and Gumede (2018) opined that in working together as a multilingual approach, ubuntu treats various languages and cultures as an asset rather than an obstacle. In the context of this study, ubuntu provides a culturally rooted lens to interrogate how curriculum practices in higher education can move beyond the tokenistic inclusion of African languages, towards genuine epistemic justice. This basis leads to the critique of neoliberal language policies and the comparison of dialogic teaching, translanguaging, and communal values as useful teaching methods. Thus, ubuntu acts both as a set of values and as a means to build better curriculum and relationships within multilingual higher education (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018).

Methodology and Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design to explore how ubuntu pedagogies can reimagine multilingual education in higher education through communal curriculum practices, especially in the Global South. Following the principles of qualitative evidence synthesis, the review was guided by a clearly defined research question using the PICo framework (Cooke et al, 2012): “How ubuntu pedagogies in South Africa (P) reimagine multilingualism (I) in higher education (Co)?” The design aimed to collate, interpret, and synthesise scholarly work grounded in both African and Global South contexts, with emphasis on decolonial, multilingual, and ubuntu educational philosophies.

A detailed analysis was carried out using different databases that included ScienceDirect, Web of Science, ProQuest Education Database, and ERIC. Because this study searched for information through the Library Information Services, these databases were relevant to this study because of their accessibility and vastness of information. A clear method was used to identify studies that address ubuntu pedagogies and multilingual practice in higher education. Publications originating from 2015 to 2025 were examined and just 12 met the main criteria decided beforehand for inclusion in the analysis. Then, researchers analysed and combined the chosen articles to respond to the research question.

Various databases were searched for information, seeking to unravel how ubuntu pedagogies could shape education in tertiary institutions. By looking for the right keywords and tuning their search, researchers chose 12 articles that fit the criteria for research and the question being asked. Both in-depth analysis and synthesis were applied to these articles to provide a full explanation of how ubuntu pedagogies can bring fresh ideas to multilingual education in South Africa. As a result, the study provides clear and helpful ideas about how communal curriculum practices impact decolonial educational ideas in multilingual institutions of higher learning.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Stern et al. (2014) argued that the inclusion and exclusion criteria in qualitative systematic reviews enable researchers to choose only the studies that are relevant and based on the research question. For purposes of this review, the study looked for peer-reviewed articles published over the last 10 years that investigate ubuntu pedagogies, multilingual practices, or focus on a decolonial angle in higher education, employing qualitative and mixed-method designs. Studies were included in the review if they looked at how participants experienced, understood or viewed these practices. For these reasons, the study excluded studies that were published before 2015, studies that were quantitative, and those that were not peer reviewed. In addition, studies that did not relate to collective learning or multilingualism were also excluded. Butler et al. (2016) emphasised that establishing specific guidelines helps avoid bias and ensures only relevant studies are included, especially when investigating a subject such as ubuntu in education. As a result, this approach deepens the review and guarantees that findings support improvements in theory, practice, and policy for higher education.

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters published between 2015 and 2025.
- Research focusing on ubuntu, multilingualism, and/or higher education.

- Studies adopting decolonial, communal, or African indigenous frameworks.
- Literature discussing curriculum practice, language policies, or pedagogical innovations.
- Studies situated in the Global South, particularly sub-Saharan Africa.

Exclusion criteria

- Publications prior to 2015.
- Articles that discuss multilingualism without linking to higher education.
- Opinion pieces, blogs, or grey literature lacking academic rigour.
- Studies with a purely cognitive or psycholinguistic approach, without cultural or philosophical framing.

Search Strategy

A full search was conducted to find studies from different categories, for example education, linguistics, African philosophy, and curriculum studies. Olawumi et al. (2024) argued that a search strategy applies various primary, secondary, and alternative search terms.

Search Terms

The keywords used were derived from the core concepts of the study:

- Ubuntu, communal values, indigenous philosophy
- Multilingualism, translanguaging, language diversity
- Higher education, university, curriculum practice
- Decoloniality, decolonial lens, epistemic justice.

Search Strings

- Primary search string: (“ubuntu” AND “multilingualism” AND “higher education”)
- Secondary search string: (“ubuntu pedagogy” AND “language policy” AND “curriculum”)
- Alternative search string: (“decolonial lens” OR “epistemic justice” AND “language diversity” AND “higher education”).

Database Search

The search was conducted across the following academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage:

- ScienceDirect
- Web of Science
- ProQuest Education Database
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center).

Filters Applied

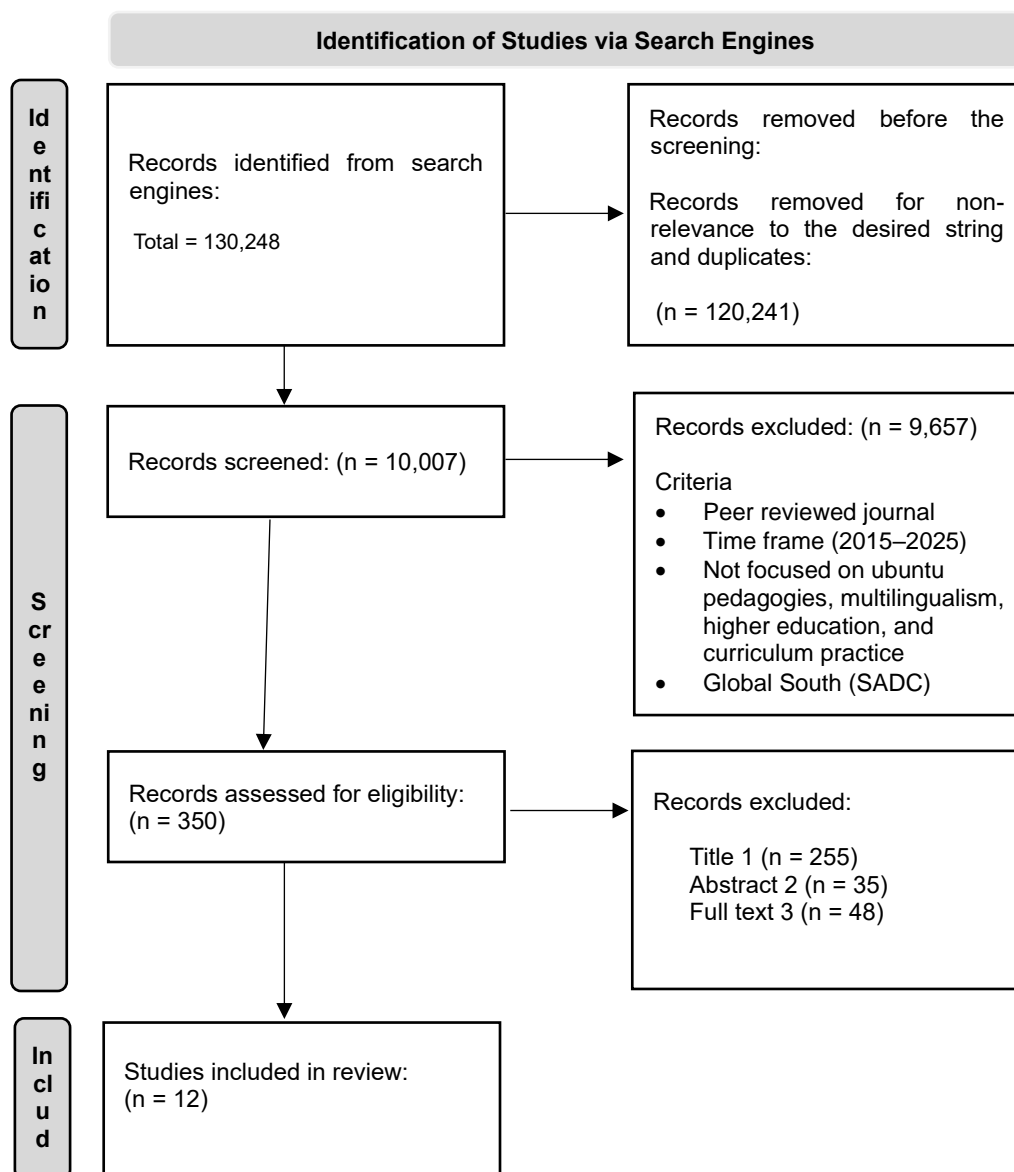
To refine the results, the following filters were applied:

- Date range: 2015–2025
- Language: English
- Document type: Peer-reviewed journals, books, and book chapters
- Subject areas: higher education, ubuntu philosophy, multilingualism, African studies.

Study Selection

The studies identified in the search were screened in two stages. In the first stage, the titles and abstracts were considered to decide if a record was relevant. Then, the shortlist was examined in full detail by assessing article texts, furthermore, identifying articles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were applied in both steps. Any differences of opinion during the selection were worked out by reviewing the articles again and talking about them. Ultimately, 12 articles were selected for in-depth analysis based on their contribution to understanding ubuntu pedagogies in multilingual, decolonial higher education contexts.

Figure 1
The PRISMA Framework (Page et al., 2021)



Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations guiding this study were deeply rooted in the principles of ubuntu, which emphasise communal responsibility, dignity, and relational accountability. Although the study was based on a systematic review of secondary sources, and did not involve direct human participants, ethical diligence was upheld through careful representation of the literature and respect for intellectual traditions. All reviewed works are peer-reviewed and publicly available, ensuring transparency and proper attribution to original authors. The study honours the cultural and epistemic integrity of African communities by engaging with ubuntu not merely as a theoretical lens but as a lived philosophy, avoiding appropriation or misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Limitations

This study relied mainly on secondary data as a qualitative systematic review instead of looking at primary real data from students, teachers, or schools using ubuntu methods. The study's findings may not be easily generalised to a broader context because it only covers South Africa. In addition, depending only on English or translated African language works in literature may lead to ignoring sources that give important cultural insights in local languages.

Analysis of the Data

In a systematic literature review, thematic analysis means carefully looking for, organising, and understanding main patterns or themes present in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thomas and Harden (2008) argued that thematic analysis is about reading and tagging extracted data to note any repeating thoughts, meanings, or connections that answer the research question. Unlike quantitative meta-analysis, which aggregates numerical data, thematic analysis focuses on synthesising rich, descriptive findings to reveal how different studies converge or diverge around key concepts (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Findings

These findings used thematic analysis to examine ubuntu pedagogies as a curriculum practice to reimagine multilingualism in higher education through African communal values, a South African perspective. Through theme analysis, the review reveals that translanguaging, communal learning, language justice, and resistance to neoliberal tendencies are common in ubuntu-influenced multilingual curriculum in South Africa. Table 1 presents the data extraction table reflecting the articles that were used to arrive at the thematic findings.

Table 1

Data Extraction

Author(s)	Title	Context	Design	Key findings	Ubuntu application
Makalela (2015)	Breaking African language boundaries: student teachers' reflections on translanguaging practices	South Africa (SA)	Interviews	Ubuntu supports cognitive flexibility through translanguaging.	Applied through translanguaging and communal learning.
Ndofirepi (2016)	Consensus or Disharmony in African Philosophy Conversations?	SA	Review	Provision of multilingual education in South Africa.	Implied in the critique of colonial language.
Heugh (2015)	Epistemologies in multilingual education: Translanguaging and genre-companions in conversation with policy and practice	SA	Systematic review	Multilingual education and translanguaging promotes learning.	Promotes togetherness, respect for everyone, and confirmation of each person's identity within the group.
Ramoupi & Ntongwane (2017)	Africanisation of Humanities Knowledge in the Universities in Africa: A Critique of the Cameroon and South African Experiences	SA	Case study	Ubuntu promotes values and responsibility in teaching and learning.	Ubuntu is central in curriculum practice.
Hlatshwayo & Shawa (2020)	Towards a Critical Re-Conceptualisation of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Role of Ubuntu-Currere in Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education	SA	Case Study	Leadership must reflect communal values for transformation.	Applies ubuntu to the multilingual teacher.
Heugh & Stroud (2020)	Multilingualism in South African Education: A Southern Perspective	SA	Book chapter	Multilingualism can be used as a tool to challenge colonialism.	Multilingualism in higher education promotes collaborative learning

Ngubane & Makua (2021)	Ubuntu pedagogy–Transforming Educational Practices in South Africa Through an African Philosophy: From Theory to Practice	SA	Literature review	Ubuntu pedagogy is a transformative and decolonial approach that promotes inclusion and social justice.	Guide the possible and effective implementation of ubuntu pedagogy in diverse educational settings
Hungwe & Ndofirepi (2022)	A Critical Interrogation of Paradigms in Discourse on the Decolonisation of Higher Education in Africa	SA	Theoretical review	Language justice contributes to inclusivity.	Values-based pedagogy inspired by ubuntu.
Maditsi et al. (2024)	A Quest for Decolonization: Incorporating Indigenous Pedagogies to Foster Teaching and Learning at Higher Education Institutions in South Africa	SA	Document analysis	Indigenous knowledge revitalises teacher.	Ubuntu-informed teacher training model.
Olawumiet al. (2024)	Situating Ubuntu Philosophy in Pre-Service Teacher Education	SA	Systematic review	Advocating for the incorporation of ubuntu philosophy into teacher education.	Ubuntu values such as humanness, interconnectedness, and communalism that are essential for decolonising the education system.
Oelofsen & Mqalo (2025)	Humanising Universities through Ubuntu: Decolonising Higher Education in South Africa	SA	Systematic review	Aligning education with the cultural and philosophical particularities of African societies.	Ubuntu enhances cultural and academic experience.
Duvenage (2025)	Realising Pedagogical Love Through Ubuntu: Cultivating Inclusion and Undoing Coloniality for Pluriverses	SA	Systematic review	Cultivating inclusion and undoing coloniality for pluriversity.	Ubuntu pedagogies can enhance pluriversity in higher education.

Introduction of Themes

The systematic review revealed five interrelated themes that collectively illustrate how ubuntu pedagogies can reimagine multilingualism in higher education through communal curriculum practices. These themes highlight the centrality of ubuntu in shaping inclusive, relational, and decolonial educational experiences. First, the use of ubuntu as a pedagogical foundation for translanguaging demonstrates how learners' linguistic resources can be integrated fluidly to promote cognitive engagement and cultural affirmation. Second, the theme of ethical curriculum reform emphasises ubuntu's potential to reshape curriculum design through values of respect, solidarity, and communal accountability. Third, the studies show how language justice and identity affirmation, rooted in ubuntu principles, contribute to dismantling linguistic hierarchies and fostering a stronger sense of belonging among students. The fourth theme is about the struggles between ubuntu and neoliberalism given that the monetisation of multilingualism tends to obstruct efforts to include ubuntu-based practises. And lastly, ubuntu demonstrates how teachers are responsible for applying these principles through mindful and inclusive methods. These five themes together increase our awareness of multilingual education as a decolonial approach and also show how ubuntu can effectively support epistemic justice in African colleges and universities.

Ubuntu Pedagogies Enabling Translanguaging

Olawumi et al. (2024) argued that ubuntu and translanguaging share many common values, which leads to students using multiple languages in their learning process. Furthermore, Oelofsen and Mqalo (2025) believed that translanguaging, in the South African context, helps to boost student involvement, rather than considering translanguaging as a weakness. Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) supported this argument by demonstrating that training programmes centred on ubuntu help teachers use inclusive language to welcome students' home languages. This shows that bringing ubuntu into translanguaging helps to reject dominant monolingual ideologies and encourages an inclusive, caring way of learning. Emphasising common identity and respect encourages the use of various languages in classes limited by earlier colonial language structures (Oelofsen & Mqalo, 2025).

In addition, Norro (2022) argued that ubuntu promotes academic literacy by allowing student to engage the content using translanguaging, thereby gaining a linguistic experience that is relatable. The study further discovered that students developed greater confidence and a stronger sense of identity when permitted to use both Indigenous and academic languages interchangeably. This echoes ubuntu's core tenet "I am because we are" in the context of language learning, promoting dialogue over rigid language boundaries. All these case studies indicate that using translanguaging goes beyond being a way to teach and demonstrates the strong epistemological principles behind ubuntu. Translanguaging with ubuntu values at the centre allows students to bring their unique languages into learning and find success as part of a group, instead of being judged by their singular language skills.

Ubuntu and Ethical Curriculum Reform

The second theme stresses how ubuntu supports changes in ethics within the curriculum, creating a different approach than the usual individualistic and competitive education that dominates higher education. Heugh (2015) showed that when education policies are guided by neoliberalism, multilingualism is positioned a marketable skill instead of its real cultural and knowledge-based value. The study further argues that neoliberalism ideas conflict with ubuntu because it places communal values and sense of responsibility above all else in education. Likewise, Ramoupi and Ntonwane (2017) demonstrated that an ubuntu-based curriculum practice promotes language inclusivity and encourages caring for students' cultural and moral lives. When studying South African universities, Ramoupi and Ntonwane (2017) further found that students preferred lessons that valued their lived experiences and the promotion of collaborative activities. These findings suggest that ubuntu offers an ethical compass that guides curriculum design toward justice, dignity, and equity.

Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) reinforced this argument by showing that ethical teaching rooted in ubuntu goes beyond merely accommodating diversity; it actively transforms the classroom into a space of solidarity and mutual accountability. Their analysis of teacher preparation programmes indicates that when educators are trained to view students not as isolated individuals but as members of a learning community, both curriculum content and delivery shift accordingly. This perspective redefines success not in terms of individual achievement but in the quality of relationships and collective understanding fostered in the classroom. Thus, ethical curriculum reform through ubuntu is not an add-on to existing structures; it requires a rethinking of the educational purpose itself. The studies mentioned above demonstrate that ubuntu has the potential to reshape higher education curriculum into more humane, socially responsive, and culturally grounded experiences that reflect African philosophical traditions.

Ubuntu-Inspired Language Justice and Identity Affirmation

The third theme examines how ubuntu approaches supporting fairness in language use and respecting student identities, mainly in postcolonial environments where African languages have been ignored. Ndofirepi (2016) argued that language should be considered more than just a way to speak with others; language can show the strength and collective identity of a group. Indigenous languages should play a major role in higher education to help decolonise education and give dignity back to marginalised groups. Ubuntu's focus on connection means that language is appreciated rather than regarded as an obstacle. Also, Chingombe and Higgs (2019) explained that because the policy is rarely implemented properly, local languages continue to be excluded in schools and universities. Heugh and Stroud (2020) further argued that real reform calls for working on deep structures, and ubuntu can encourage this shift by considering language as something all community members own and together protect.

This theme is further supported by Makalela (2015), who explored the role of language in identity construction within decolonised classrooms. The study found that students taught in environments that acknowledged their home languages reported greater confidence, cultural affirmation, and academic engagement. Such outcomes align directly with ubuntu's values of mutual respect, shared humanity, and the validation of personal and collective identity. These studies illustrate that language justice is not just a pedagogical concern but a deeply ethical one. Ubuntu-inspired practices enable students to see their languages not as inferior, but as valid mediums of academic expression and intellectual development. By restoring voice and visibility to marginalised linguistic identities, ubuntu pedagogies play a vital role in advancing equity and epistemic justice in multilingual university settings.

Institutional Challenges and Neoliberal Tensions

The next theme centres on the ongoing conflict between community-based ubuntu beliefs and the weight of neoliberal policies in most modern universities. According to Heugh (2015), it is common for languages to be incorporated into policymaking, not because of their cultural relevance but because economists and policymakers consider them more valuable for their financial contribution. In contrast to ubuntu, the instrumentalist view prize only one type of language for identity, moral action and jointly produced knowledge. It is evident from the research that even when ubuntu-based language practices are tried in schools, they do not become established in the system because this system remains influenced by individualism and market priorities (Heugh, 2015).

Both Kamwangamalu (2016) and Maditsi et al. (2024) submitted to this concern through their policy analysis. Their studies explained that while African countries often have good language policies, their practical application is disrupted by slow government action, unmotivated officials, and ancient colonial rules. In places where only top officials make the decisions and everyone must meet set targets, the value of ubuntu is ignored. Maditsi et al.'s (2024) findings indicate that the intervention by policymakers that is inconsistent with the actual practice undermines the attempts to create a platform for native languages to thrive in higher education. It is very challenging to apply ubuntu pedagogies in higher education due to these institutional dynamics that are still colonial. Some educators bring ubuntu values into their classrooms, but the infrastructure that can enable this pedagogical innovation that promotes multilingualism is disrupted by the lack of resources. Consequently, ubuntu's ability to improve education may be confined to small actions instead of acting as a major catalyst for change.

Ubuntu as a Catalyst for Teacher Transformation

This final theme deals with how ubuntu is influencing changes in teacher education and development. The review depicts ubuntu as a significant learning tool for students and for the way educators change their approach to teaching. Olawumi et al. (2024) stated that instilling ubuntu while training teachers can help them practise an ubuntu pedagogy that benefits everyone in the community. Furthermore, Olawumi et al. (2024) discovered that educators who were trained and became aware of ubuntu's priorities, such as interconnection, respect, and responsibility, better recognised cultural and language diversity in their classrooms. Afterwards, teachers began approaching students from a broader view and engaged with what students experience in real life.

Further support for this theme come from Ngubane and Makua (2021) and Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020). Ngubane and Makua (2021) argued that ubuntu-oriented teacher education challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies by placing Indigenous knowledge systems at the heart of curriculum design. His findings suggest that when pre-service teachers are trained through ubuntu, they are more likely to create learning environments rooted in empathy and collaboration. Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020), working in teacher and education development, found that applying ubuntu fostered trust, confidence, and relational learning among both educators and students. These studies collectively show that ubuntu is a transformative force in teacher development, equipping educators to model the very values they wish to instil. In doing so, ubuntu pedagogy becomes a sustainable practice, not only through content, but through the conduct and consciousness of the teachers themselves (Duvenage, 2025).

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this review have significant theoretical implications for curriculum theory, language education, and decolonial pedagogy. Most notably, they validate ubuntu as a robust theoretical framework for reimagining multilingualism not just as a linguistic practice, but as a relational and ethical commitment in higher education. By affirming communal interdependence, ubuntu challenges dominant Western educational theories that prioritise individual achievement and standardisation (Chingombe & Higgs, 2019). The consistent emphasis across the reviewed literature on collaboration, collective identity, and mutual care underscores ubuntu's relevance to theories of social constructivism and critical pedagogy, while also extending these traditions through an African philosophical lens. This positions ubuntu not simply as a cultural add-on but as a foundational worldview with the capacity to reshape pedagogical relationships, curriculum design, and knowledge production on epistemologically just terms.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the limitations of existing multilingual and curriculum theories that treat language as a neutral medium. Ubuntu exposes how language is deeply embedded in power, identity, and belonging issues that are often sidelined in traditional models. By incorporating ubuntu, new theoretical ground is opened for understanding multilingualism as both a social practice and a moral imperative. The review also suggests that ubuntu can bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher education by rooting reflective practice in communal values. This shift compels theorists to consider not only what knowledge is worth teaching, but also *how* and with whom it is constructed. Ultimately, these findings support the development of decolonial theories of education that are grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and that actively resist the neoliberal rationalities currently shaping higher education policy and practice.

Discussion

The review reveals that using ubuntu pedagogy is a meaningful and viable alternative for conventional, mostly monolingual models of higher education. Ubuntu was found in each of the 12 studies to emphasise connections, openness, and linguistic justice. By applying translanguaging, dialogic teaching, and group knowledge building, ubuntu-centred classrooms empower students to help create and share meaning connected to their cultures and languages. Such ideas become especially vital in parts of postcolonial Africa, where curriculum practice has mostly followed Eurocentric standards that marginalise the value of native languages and epistemologies (Khohliso & Mgqwashu, 2024).

At the same time, the analysis points out that ubuntu beliefs are often in conflict with the neoliberal logic embedded in many higher education institutions. Even though some educators are taking steps to implement ubuntu values in education in their classrooms, the culture inside schools usually means they still have to focus on standardisation, market-driven achievements, and meeting rules, rather than on relationships and morality (Mabena, 2023). Research shows that, even with careful language policies, school systems cannot accomplish much unless they have real strategies and necessary intervention (Letseka, 2012). This shows that a more serious commitment is needed from universities to fully incorporate decolonial ideas, not just create empty symbols, to let ubuntu change how the institutions are run.

The findings highlight significant implications for theory, practice, and future research. The findings advocate for the development of curriculum and language theories that prioritise ubuntu pedagogies. The findings further urge educators to adopt ubuntu not only in pedagogy but in the way they relate to students and knowledge itself, and the relationship of learning to the social experiences of learners. For future research, there is a need for longitudinal and comparative studies to evaluate how ubuntu-informed practices evolve over time and across different contexts (Msila, 2025). The study suggests that lawmakers and policymakers should put communal values, multilingualism, and culturally relevant teaching at the heart of legislation and educational plans. Then, ubuntu can serve as a foundation for changing the way education is delivered in Africa.

Conclusion

This review has shown that ubuntu pedagogy offers a transformative lens through which multilingualism in higher education can be reimagined as a communal, inclusive, and decolonial curriculum practice. The 12 articles reviewed consistently demonstrated that ubuntu's relational values of interdependence, dignity, and mutual care create space for language practices that affirm identity, promote epistemic justice, and challenge exclusionary norms rooted in colonial and neoliberal legacies. Whether through translanguaging, ethical curriculum reform, or teacher development, ubuntu emerged not only as a philosophical concept but as a practical framework for reshaping how language and learning are approached in South African universities. At the same time, the findings revealed that institutional constraints, inconsistent policy implementation, and prevailing individualistic logics continue to limit the full realisation of ubuntu in practice. Nonetheless, the review affirms that ubuntu is not merely compatible with the goals of multilingual education, it is essential to achieving them in ways that are locally meaningful and globally relevant.

Recommendations

As the findings suggest, several recommendations are made. First, institutions of higher learning should include ubuntu pedagogies in the way teachers are trained, in teaching practice, and in policies on multilingual use. Furthermore, training should focus on discussing and applying the ubuntu teaching strategy, encouraging collaborative knowledge production. In addition, policymakers and lawmakers have to check and improve national and college education plans by approving laws that secure different languages, reform assessment approaches, and provide finances for building culturally connected course materials. And further work needs to be carried out examining ubuntu's use in different learning contexts through studies that follow students over an extended period and compare outcomes.

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What We Want: Student Voices in Shaping a New African University

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Abstract

Students' voices have often been heard in protests against unfair treatment and ignored needs by university administration and lecturers. Student unions have represented students in decision making but have in some instances been labelled "political agents for opposition parties." The long-standing cry by students stems from their need to be involved in matters concerning them, their needs, and expectations from universities at which they are enrolled. Thus, students' active participation in decision making is an important element in reshaping African universities. Failure to pay attention to student voices defeats the purpose of 21st-century participatory and inclusive higher education. This paper explores the participatory involvement of students in creating a new African university. Using Dunne & Zanstra's (2011) Students as Change Agents Model as a theoretical framework, the researcher explores the role of students in higher education governance in the transition to a new African university. Employing a mixed method approach, data were collected through online questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions. Findings show that more than 60 per cent of students feel unheard and uninvolved in university governance. Overall, students are willing and ready to use dialogue and take part in the transformation of higher education but can only do so through equal representation in higher education governance structures. Conclusively, it is important that higher education governance utilises inclusive and participatory approaches for ownership of goals, co-creation of knowledge, as well as decision-making processes. Accountability is key in governance, and should include the voices of students for the avoidance of conflict and violence.

Key words: participatory involvement, students' voices, decision making, African university, re-shaping

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Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, dialogue around shifting curricula from teacher-centred approaches to learner-centred approaches took the world stage. Many important shifts in curriculum and pedagogy were introduced into the classroom allowing for participatory involvement of students in the teaching and learning process. Teachers ceased to be knowledge sources but became facilitators of learning, new approaches, and interactive tools as technology advancements were integrated into education (Sikhakhane et al., 2020). This allowed for students' voices to be heard in classrooms across the world. However, in higher education, whilst students have a participatory role in the learning process through individualised research and participation in lecture dialogue, there remain gaps in how far they can be involved in governance issues. From my observations, the voices of students have often been heard in protests against unfair treatment and ignored needs by university administration and lecturers.

The involvement of students in decision making has been represented by student unions, who are at times mislabelled political agents for opposition parties (Mugume & Luescher, 2017). It is my submission that the long-standing cry by students stems from their need to be involved in governance matters concerning them. Thus, student involvement and participation in decision making is an important element in reshaping African universities. Prescribing the needs of, and ignoring the voices of, African students has led to continued strife between university administrators and students, thus leading to contentious relationships that do not support development. Ignoring student voices defeats the purpose of 21st-century participatory and inclusive higher education. Against this backdrop, rethinking governance in the context of an African university becomes of paramount importance.

Research Questions

This paper focuses on whether students' voices are heard in higher education, and what expectations students have in terms of their involvement in governance issues. The guiding questions for this research are:

- To what extent do students in higher education perceive that their voices are heard in institutional decision-making processes?
- What expectations do students have regarding their involvement in governance issues within higher education institutions?

Literature Review: Governance and Students' Voices in Higher Education

Governance as defined by Rahaman (2024) is multifaceted and captures the ways in which power is utilised to manage and control resources and systems in a country or institution. It includes the capacity for designing, formulating and implementing policies, and discharging functions (Rahim, 2019). In higher education, governance refers to the ways through which higher education institutions are organised and managed (Wolhuter & Langa, 2021). Student representation refers to

the formal structures and processes of elected or appointed student representatives speaking or acting on behalf of the collective student body in higher education governance within a higher education institution or a higher education system. (Klemenčič et al., 2015, p. vii)

The confluence of higher education governance and student representation in higher education governance implies the participatory inclusion of students' representatives in the process of designing, formulating and implementing policies, and executing functions. Allowing students to have a say in issues affecting them develops a sense of ownership of the higher education institutions they are affiliated to.

An interesting observation in the debate on students' governance in higher education in Africa was made by Altbach (2018, p. xi) who pointed out that:

Universities would not exist without students. Students are at the heart of the academic enterprise. It is worth remembering that some of the earliest universities, in medieval Italy, were established and managed by students. In the 21st century, in the era of massification, students are often seen as burdens, customers, or sources of income, but seldom as the key rationale for the university.

The failure to acknowledge the importance of students' voices has led to vandalism and anarchism being not only "conventional, but so intensely socialised" (Rapatsa, 2017, p. 13). What is missing is the acknowledgement that decisions that have a direct effect on students are being made in their absence (Davids & Waghid, 2020). Thus, decisions that are relevant to students must involve them in order for them to be acceptable and meaningful. The importance of student voices can therefore not be ignored in dialogue concerning students.

Students' Protests in African Universities

Demonstrations and protests have been used by students since the 1960s to gain mileage and attention to student grievances in various higher education institutions (Hungwe & Divala, 2020). In Africa, most of these protests turn violent because students feel that they are being ignored by the system at both institutional and government levels. This is an indication that student protests are linked to the social, economic, and political landscape of the countries in which they take place—thus leading to the politicisation of student protests (Ruwoko, 2020). The politicisation of student representation does nothing to improve the relationship between student bodies in Africa and higher education administrators. The responses of government are almost predictable as those who involve themselves in the protests are often arrested, brutalised, locked up and, at times, murdered (Mlambo, 2013). The student representation councils (SRCs) that are meant to represent students have been demonised as political agents, hence every protest that students engage in is quickly viewed from a political standpoint. Hungwe and Divala (2020,

pp. 149–150) stated that “conceptually, student protests are organised, collective actions in which students coalesce to express grievances or reservations against the unfavourable conditions within the university or the nation.” Concisely, student protests are “incidents of student revolt or unrest, which constitute a serious challenge or threat to the established order or to sanctioned authority or norms” (Nkinyangi, 1991, p. 158). While students are well within their rights to protest, the series of students’ arrests and protests point to erosion of progressive rights (Ruwoko, 2020).

Students’ involvement in national politics does not make the situation any better but further aggravates and supports the widely held notion that students are political agents for opposition parties. While there is a thin divide between academic life and socio-economic and political life, the expectations on students to separate the two becomes unreasonable. Ruwoko (2020) quoted Takudzwa Ngadziore, the 11th Zimbabwe National Students Union president commenting on the issue of students’ protests who stated that they were:

Facing unjustified arrests for claiming their space in the freedom arena, shockingly holding placards in Zimbabwe which speaks to the rotten life we wake up to makes you a terrorist in the eyes of the state.

He argued that protests are done as protection of student voices, and political and economic issues that affect students’ lives. There are numerous reports of students being abducted and tortured because they are considered a dangerous entity and a potent symbol of black aspiration for young people and their families across Zimbabwe (Ruwoko, 2020). Students’ reactions to instances where they feel ignored can be non-violent-marching, singing, picketing, class boycotting, and disruption of lectures (Fomunyam, 2017). Violent forms of protest are destructive in nature and can be in the form of burning, looting, and in Nigeria in some instances, university management has been abducted, kidnapped, and tortured to coerce administration into responding to student grievances (Aghedo, 2015; Okey, 2017).

Student protests attempt to influence institutional governance to look into student issues. The process of addressing students’ issues needs to take into consideration responsibility, respect, and accountability between parties. Violent protests cannot be condoned when there are other reasonable and peaceful ways of addressing grievances. It is important that “university students and management transcend the trappings of historicity and ideology” (Hungwe & Divala, 2020, p. 158) in which violent revolutions are used to react to unresolved grievances in order to usher in a new African university in which the voices of students are heard without violence.

There is a common thread that ties university students’ reasons for protesting. This implies that university students across Africa face similar challenges and react in similar ways, possibly because their voices are either not heard or taken for granted. The reasons for protests in higher education institutions in Africa include the quest for freedom of expression, a call for the end of corruption, which has dire effects on future prospects of university graduates, better living conditions, free or affordable education, a stop

to fees hikes, the need for quality accommodation and food at campus, inadequate or non-existent funding, and transportation to and from campus (Holdt, 2014; Hungwe & Divala, 2020; Okey, 2017; Ruwoko, 2020).

There are however specific incidents in South Africa that sparked huge protests, which shook higher education across Africa. In 2015, at University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, and Cape Peninsula University of Technology, students protested against slow transformation processes, language policy, and other academic policies that are made without students' involvement, race relations, access, and funding opportunities (Mashayamombe & Nomvete, 2021). In the same period of 2015–2016, university students organised a protest dubbed "Burn to be Heard," which caused the destruction of campus property costing over eight million rand (Daniel, 2018.). Such instances of violence have devastating effects on higher education administration as well as students' access to quality and affordable education (Duncan, 2016).

The frequency of students' protests at African universities calls for a new form of thinking regarding decision making in higher education. For the African university to be viewed as a site for democratic leadership and academic finesse, there is a need to move away from violent student activism. It is shocking and disappointing that:

In nearly all African universities, there is recurrence of violent student protests, which result in massive property destruction, injury and loss of human life. Owing to the over-valuation of credentialism, which is possibly hindered by access issues such as the ever-increasing tuition fees, poor university management, political intolerance and the economic malaise. The African university is typically a volatile site of insurrection, unrest, and running battles between police and student protesters. (Hungwe & Divala, 2020, p. 154)

Failure by university management to respond to and dialogue with students pushes them to resort to violence after which they are termed rogue, rebels, and uncultured. There is therefore a need for "systematic and regular interactions for dialogue between university management and student union organisations" (Hungwe & Divala, 2020, p. 160). Lack of regular dialogue and deliberations creates mistrust and plants seeds of violence. This clearly indicates a gaping hole in the processes of decision making (Davids, 2014). For transformation to occur there has to exist mutual understanding and mutual dialogue undergirded by transparency and accountability. The university belongs to students, administrators, and the broader community. Decision making has to be inclusive of all the parties involved through fair representation. Therefore, the new African university has to be premised on the imperatives of consultation, discussion, and debate on areas of mutual concern to all stakeholders involved.

Hungwe and Divala (2020) have raised questions around the handling of student representation in drafting institutional budgets and policies, financial transparency, and in high management structures such as senate. Therefore, when students resort to violence or protest, should there not be interrogation of the deep-seated structures that systematically exclude students in matters concerning them? It is thus critical to open our minds to question whether the decision-making processes being used in higher education are effective or need re-thinking and re-designing. Unpacking these issues is central to clarifying assumptions about important issues such as the financial standing of the institutions. Students generally believe that universities have huge financial resources to address the various challenges of accommodation, funding, and food among others. Despondency and violence are created by these assumptions in the absence of mutual dialogue, transparency, and accountability by university management. While Hungwe and Divala (2020) raised important questions for university administration, one central question that the new African university should be asking is: “What do students want?”

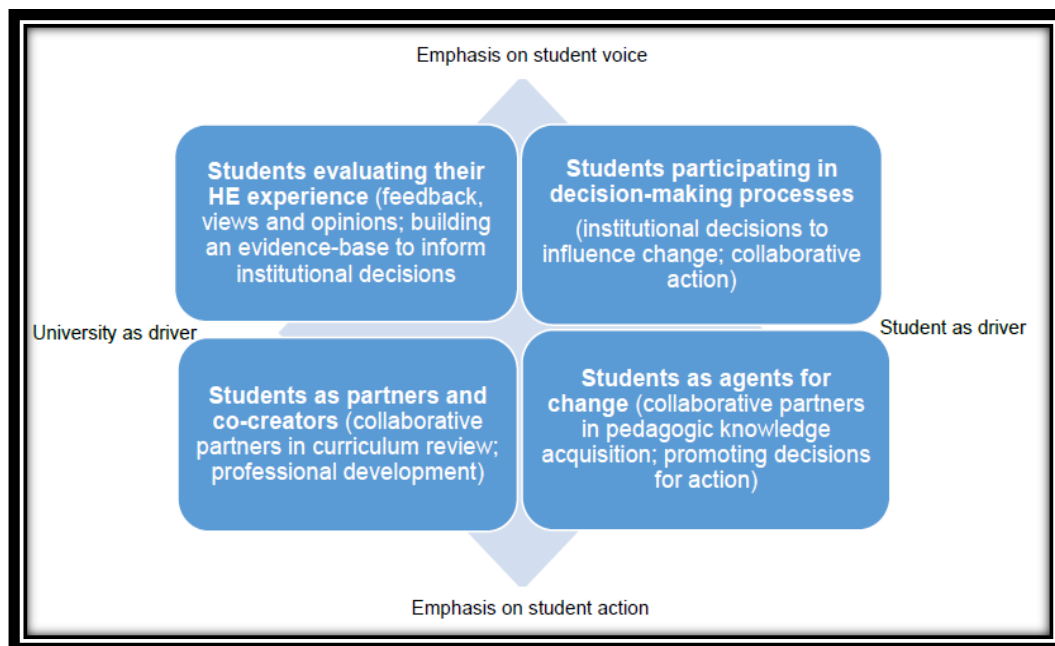
Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in Dunne and Zanstra’s (2011) Students as Change Agents Model, which draws from the understanding that involvement of students in various processes at higher education institutions has evolved over time, with students being “included in a variety of ways, ranging from feedback on learning experiences to involving students in curriculum design, and including student representation in decision-making processes” (Strydom & Loots, 2020, p. 20). There is also need to explore students’ experiences and make them known in order to foster accountability and transparency. Student voices are often heard through established roles and processes that include student unions, representatives, associations, forums, survey respondents, and co-researchers (Strydom & Loots, 2020). Dunne and Zanstra (2011) proposed a model for student involvement in both the change and decision-making processes in higher education (see Figure 1).

This model conceptualises students’ inclusion in higher education decision making. Dunne and Zanstra (2011) argued that the missing element in higher education institutions’ effort to engage and include students is the actual process of allowing students to bring about change. The model differentiates the four forms of student involvement in institutional policy and practice. Students in their roles as evaluators, participants, partners, and agents of change can be both voices and drivers of policy and practice in university decision making. Thus, it is important to position students in their roles to improve quality in higher education institutions. In the model, there are four key roles that students should be allowed to undertake if any real change is to occur in higher education institutions. In their model, Dunne and Zanstra suggested that through surveys, higher education institutions can measure students’ experiences and engagement thus providing feedback on the quality of education that is being imparted by the university.

Figure 1

Students as Change Agents Model (Dunne & Zanstra, 2011)



This is meant to help improve universities and improve learning. These authors argued that merely listening to students' voices is not enough but should be supported by "giving students an opportunity to generate their own ideas and solutions that bring about changes" (Dunne & Zanstra, 2011, p. 25). By doing this, students do not become consumers of what universities offer but become co-creators and co-owners of university goals and outcomes. They further argued that treating students as mere consumers is what infuriates students, and leads to public shows of disgruntlement in the form of violent protests. Students' evaluations of what university experiences they are getting become the key to unlocking better universities in which the voices of students matter.

Inclusion of students through their active involvement in committees and departments as well as other governance structures is important in developing good leadership among students. The SRC is one of the structures that students can get involved in, but it is not clear how far their involvement goes. Opening up space for students' involvement in higher education governance provides opportunities for contributing to quality through democratic human engagement (Waghid, 2019). Positioning students as participants in decision-making processes "shows institutional commitment to greater student involvement in changes to teaching, learning, and institutional development" (Strydom & Loots, 2020, p. 26).

Dunne and Zanstra (2011) were of the belief that involvement of students in institutional developments, teaching and learning spaces, reviewing pedagogical strategy and practices, as well as through research makes them co-creators and experts, which is critical for the advancement of higher education outcomes. Involving students in higher education governance research shows a causal link

between students' involvements in curriculum design and enhanced teaching and learning (Brooman et al., 2015). Nel (2017) asserted that collaborative student relationships contribute immensely to knowledge creation and meaningful learning experiences through participatory dialogic pedagogy and fosters liberated students (Mudehwe-Gonhovi et al., 2018). This implies that inclusive governance provides opportunities for students to freely share their ideas and create for themselves higher education institutions that align and support student growth and visibility in issues that affect them. When students become partners in higher education governance, it increases their potential to become positive change agents who use more constructive strategies for development, as opposed to violence.

As key stakeholders in higher education institutions, students are expected to support and advance institutional goals and outcomes. One of the most important roles they can be assigned is to become actively engaged in influencing change and taking up leadership roles (Seale, 2016). Student activism is one of the most common examples of how students can be involved in transforming institutions. Student voices have often been associated with protests against high tuition fees, student debt, accommodation, funding, various forms of marginalisation, socio-economic inequalities that affect issues of access, and perceived oppressive higher education systems (Nielsen, 2019; Stuurman, 2018). It is pertinent that as higher education enters into current modes of governance, the place of student voices be positioned to address a broad range of issues that affect teaching and learning outcomes as well as the positive development of the institutions the students are affiliated to. This paper seeks to determine if students perceive these roles as being acknowledged by their universities and if their involvement is considered important. Furthermore, it outlines students' expectations of their involvement in university governance.

I argue, in this paper, that to ensure meaningful and effective student representation and involvement in higher education governance, there must be collective student voice presence within higher education decision-making processes. For full student representation, democratic procedures, student-created communication channels, and formal structures need to be availed to ensure representatives convey collective student interests in higher education decision-making bodies (Klemenčič, 2014). There is no arguing that students are key stakeholders in higher education and therefore deserve a serious level of input and influence (Tyrrell & Varnham, 2015) in the formulation of higher education policy and educational quality assurance. This could help to develop graduates who possess leadership and democratic skills, critical thinking, and responsible citizenship thus eradicating the culture of violent protests to be heard. This research collects diverse student views and perspectives to create an enabling environment for students to become more involved and attached to their institutions, leading to increased development and less destruction.

Methodology

In order to gather student voices in the process of transitioning to a new African university, the researcher employed a mixed methods approach utilising online questionnaires with closed questions for the quantitative data and open-ended questions for the generation of qualitative data. The target participants were university students who were identified through purposive snowball sampling. This is a hybrid method in which the researcher identifies participants based on specific characteristics, then the identified participants refer suitable candidates to become part of the study (Ting et al., 2025). The researcher identified known university students and shared the online questionnaire link, which they then shared with other students they knew. This was done because universities were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were using online models of learning. The researcher also wanted to gain access to as many university students as possible in a short space of time. The closed questions data collected were analysed using Excel, and charts were generated to represent the findings.

Thematic analysis was also incorporated for analysing qualitative data gathered from open-ended questions. This method was selected because it is suitable for qualitative research where the researcher wants to systematically organise and analyse data sets. The researcher searches for themes that reflect the narratives prominent in a data set (Dawadi, 2020). Data were organised around key themes that emerged from the participants' responses. A total of 107 responses were recorded for this study from participants learning at various universities in Africa, with the highest numbers coming from South Africa (54) and Zimbabwe (40), respectively. To protect the identities of the students, no email addresses were collected on the online form.

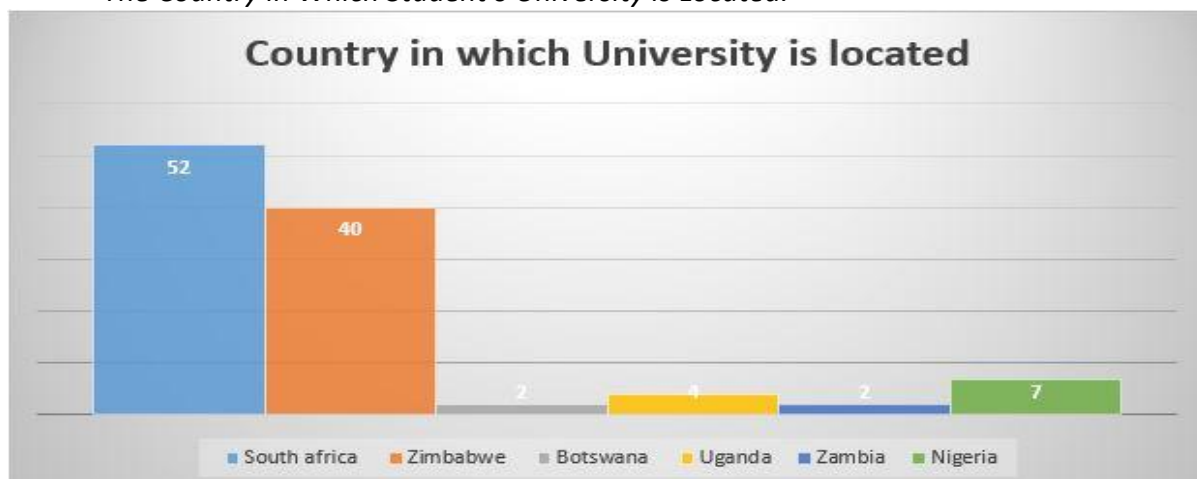
Students' Voices in Higher Education Institutions: Analysis, Findings, and Discussion

In this section, I discuss the findings of the study that sought to interrogate students' perceived levels of inclusion in their universities' governance systems, and what their expectations were. The aim was to come up with a collaborative approach that serves both the university and the students through reduced violence and protests, which have become the norm for students in higher education. Findings from the 107 questionnaire responses indicate that the voices of students need to be heard to avoid instances where they have to resort to violence. While violence is used as justification for gaining visibility and forcing higher education leadership and government to take note of student grievances, it is a costly mechanism that affects access and quality of education, among other things.

The respondents were from different universities in different African countries including South Africa (52), Zimbabwe (40), Botswana (2), Uganda (4), Zambia (2) and Nigeria (7), as shown in Figure 2. This data collected was useful in understanding the different contexts in which university students find themselves and how their thoughts and views can be consolidated in the process of transitioning to a new African university.

Figure 2

The Country in Which Student's University is Located.



Data collected also shows that the respondents were enrolled in different academic programmes ranging from undergraduate, master's to doctoral (see Figure 3). Most (76%) were studying towards an undergraduate qualification, with 19% studying towards a master's qualification and 5% enrolled as doctoral students (PhD).

Figure 3

Level of Education Being Studied Towards



Asked how much they felt their voices were being heard by university administration, most students said they did not feel that their voices were being heard. Most (60%) of the students felt that their concerns were not acknowledged while a mere 10% felt that their issues were being acknowledged, and 30% were indifferent. The results reflect a general neglect of students' voices and needs. When the majority of students feel that they are not considered important, and that their issues are taken for granted, they may begin to resent the very systems meant to help them in advancing their academic and personal development (Nielsen, 2019). When students feel ignored, they retaliate by engaging in violent

disruptions of both academic and administrative activities (Fomunyan, 2017). Democratising students' governance through practical engagement and involvement is central to retaining the dignity of the higher education space (Dunne & Zustra, 2011). The importance of students' engagement and involvement in higher education governance cannot be ignored. Engaging students to become change agents through participatory involvement in higher education governance would go a long way in influencing democratic responses to student and administrative concerns. Regular dialogue is key to reducing violent protests by students.

Another question related to what challenges students encountered as a result of lack of engagement. Key issues that emerged from students' responses were organised into four major themes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Key Thematic Challenges Faced by Students as a Result of Lack of Engagement

Thematic Area	Example of Challenge	Effect on Students
Systematic challenges	Unexpected and inconveniencing decisions, non-negotiable rules (case in point, closure of universities during the COVID-19 pandemic), neglect of student needs.	Isolation and lack of institutional support.
Poor communication	Late communication, inadequate dissemination of notices and critical information, misinformation.	Undermined students' ability to make informed academic and personal decisions, causing confusion and unnecessary stress.
Economic and social concerns	Unplanned fees hikes, financial struggles, and broader socio-economic challenges.	Additional burdens on students already experiencing pressure of learning demands and exam stress exacerbates their vulnerabilities.
Administration-related challenges	Inefficient processes, lack of consultation, and deficiencies in campus resources.	Accommodation shortages, and limited food facilities.

The themes presented in Table 1 reflect an environment that neglects to sufficiently integrate student well-being and participation into institutional decision-making processes. To support this, Student 33 pointed out that the lack of acknowledgement of students' grievances deprives students of quality learning experiences. Students, at times do not receive proper lectures and have nowhere to complain or, if they do, they are often ignored. This tends to give lecturers too much power and allows them to bully and abuse students. Student 33 wrote:

Some administrative staff members also ill-treat students as they feel they have the upper hand and students are not important. We are viewed as insignificant elements in the university structure, yet without us, there would be no universities.

This confirms Altbach's (2018, p. xi) assertion that "universities would not exist without students. Students are at the heart of the academic enterprise." When students are trivialised in the university structures, they do not feel the importance of upholding and preserving the values, goals, outcomes, and property of the universities they belong to. It is important that students be involved in university governance as suggested by Dunne and Zanstra (2011) in their Students as Change Agents Model.

A large proportion (60%) of undergraduate students pointed out that one of the biggest challenges facing students as a result of lack of engagement and involvement is unfair practices by lecturers and ill-treatment by university administrators. Most (80%) of the undergraduate students who complained of ill-treatment by lecturers and administrators were from South African and Zimbabwean universities. As stressed by Student 7:

At times we have solutions to issues that may be troubling administrators, for instance, online registration, but we are not given a chance to assist since those in charge of the process tend to be foul mouthed and do not take time to listen to some suggestions we make. In the end, some people fail to register on time or register at all leading to loss of higher education opportunities for our colleagues.

Thus, viewing students as partners in university governance becomes a transformative factor for the African university. Giving students an opportunity to evaluate their university experiences and engaging them to become co-creators of solutions allows for the provision of quality feedback, which is central to the provision of quality learning experiences. It also helps in the upholding of university values and achievement of goals.

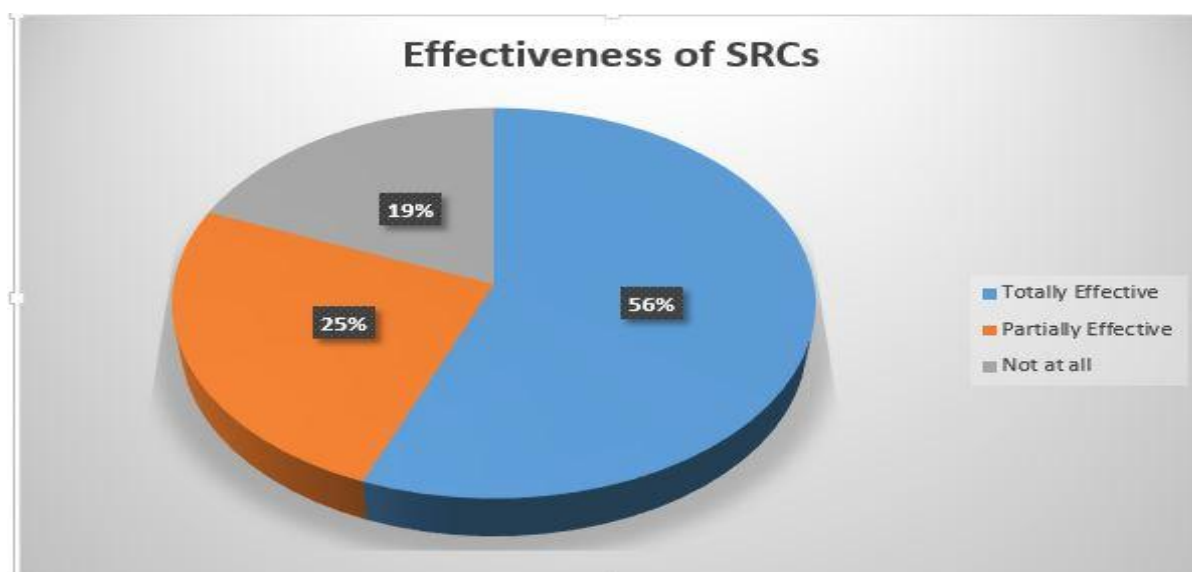
Students were also asked which key areas they considered critical and required most engagement by university administrators, and they identified the following: academic experiences; students' welfare, and work-life balance for students who work for fees, accommodation and funding opportunities; administrative issues (particularly the relationship between administrative staff and students); and programme structures and learning models. The concerns raised by students are some of the issues that

have often caused violent protests across African universities. It is this “overplayed and broken record” by students that is causing many instances of destructive protests. Thus, it is my argument that the new African university must seriously consider these concerns by engaging students as evaluators, partners, participants, and change agents to develop a new relationship that makes students an important element in higher education governance.

In the questionnaire, students were asked to comment on the effectiveness of SRCs in representing student views. The responses are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

How Effective is the SRC in Representing Student Views?



The results from data collected shows that 56% of the students believed that the SRC is an effective body, but only if given space to articulate the concerns and ideas of students. A quarter (25%) of the respondents stated that the SRC was partially effective and 19% did not see the effectiveness of the SRC, with some labelling them “useless.” Student 48 explained why they feel that the SRC is effective, stating:

If the SRC can influence students to go on a protest against administrative decisions or non-decision, then imagine the power they have if they are allowed to sit on higher education governance bodies.

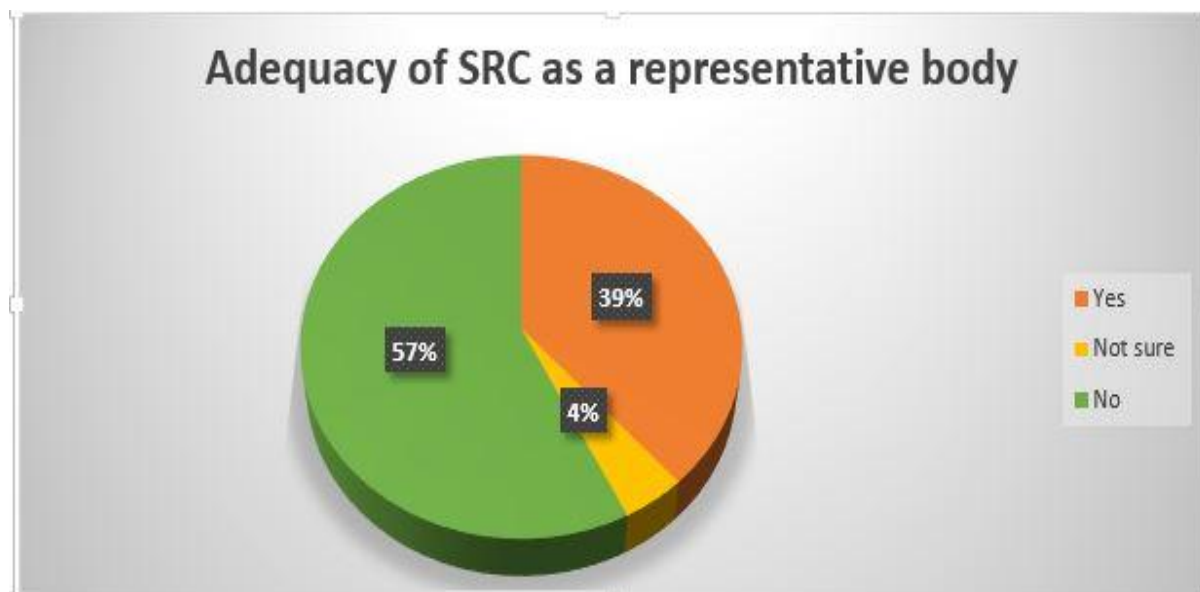
From the data collected, 57% of the respondents in universities across Africa do not believe that the SRC is enough to represent their views due to lack of full representation at departmental level (see Figure 5). This means that students feel that the SRC is not fully representative of the total students’ body because some departments do not have representatives in the Council. Others described the SRC as useless since because does not engage with all students. One reason was that the SRC could

Do best if they concerned themselves with all students' concerns, especially on student finance. A non-politically aligned SRC in the new African university would be ideal. Politics is a true spoiler. (Student 102)

The above comment by Student 102 shows that students are being used by political parties or are using their positions in student leadership to settle political scores, thus turning students' concerns into political dialogue, a move that does not help students' activism.

Figure 5

Is the SRC Enough to Represent Your Views and Voices? If Not, Why?



The author strongly believes that if universities do not capture students through participatory involvement and dialogue, they will continue to be taken advantage of for political mileage by various political parties who have other agendas outside of education and skills impartation. Many (39%) of the respondents believed that the SRC is adequate as a representative body while 4% did not view them as adequate.

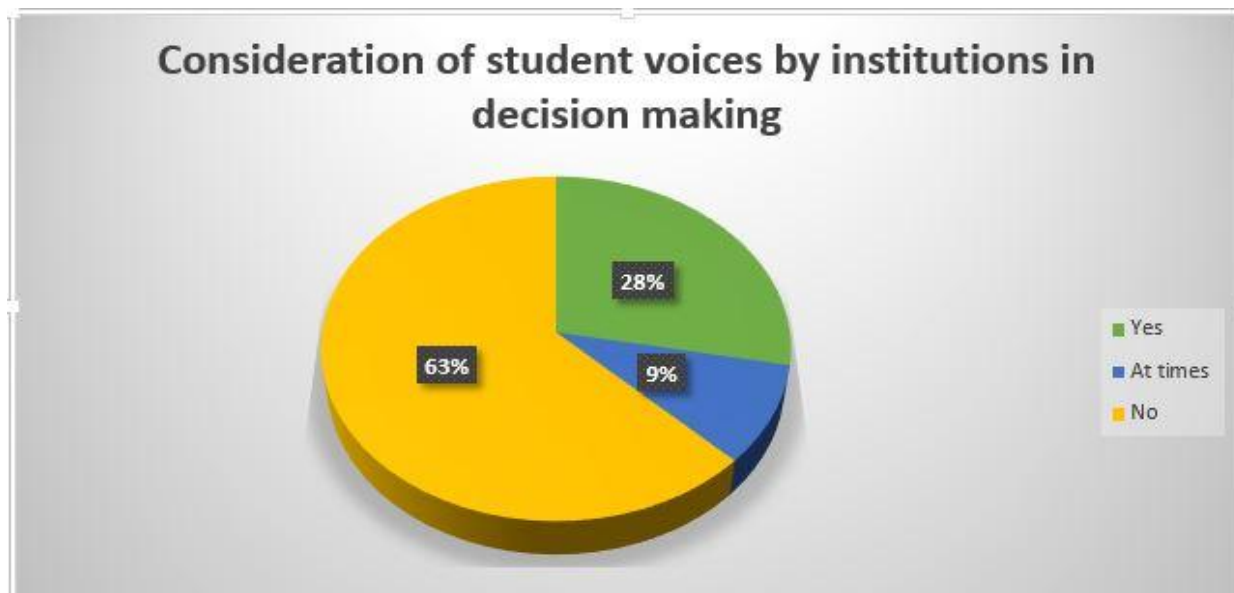
Data collected showed that 63% of respondents feel that their institutions do not consider student voices in decision-making, 28% feel that their voices are heard and only 9% feel that universities consider student voices sometimes (Figure 6). Most students therefore generally feel ignored and unacknowledged when they lodge complaints or have ideas to share.

One of the greatest challenges for higher education in Africa is “how to facilitate the creation of spaces in which the student voice is not merely demonstrated as being present, but in which that presence also has power, authenticity and validity” (Hall, 2017, p. 183). Thus, the question on what African universities can

do better to ensure that student voices are heard and can be useful in influencing decision making on issues that involve them was posed to the student respondents.

Figure 6

Do the Decision-Making Processes at Your Current Institution Consider Student Voices?



In response to this, students advocated for a university system and culture that empowers and involves students in decision-making processes that potentially affect students. They further called upon university leadership not to pay lip-service to promises and policies because this has an effect on students' future outcomes. To improve the process of decision making in universities, it is important, according to the respondents, that more students participate in decision-making boards and create platforms for students to freely and safely voice their concerns and opinions as well as share ideas with higher education governing bodies. While SRCs are a central element in the relationship between administration and the student body, 80% of the students who responded to the questionnaire strongly felt that there is a need for better student representation through increased number of representatives and introduction of representation at departmental level. Student 69 commented: "Some departments have no representation in the SRC therefore making it difficult for their concerns to be heard." Most student revolts have been marred by insinuations of politics and affiliation of students to political parties such that some students believe that it is the politicisation of student concerns, which breaks the communication line. Thus, to improve communication, students suggested that students who are apolitical must lead SRCs, and should be allowed to sit on decision-making boards. The implication is that open-minded dialogue and democracy are key in participatory and inclusive student engagement, as suggested in Dunne and Zanstra's (2011) model of student involvement.

Key to student involvement and engagement in higher education governance is the element of students as participants, which allows the voices of students to be heard in various ways. Students were asked what would be the best way for student involvement in decision making and they suggested various strategies for gathering students' voices. These included:

- Surveys, questionnaires, and dialogue.
- Educating students on their rights to build interest in decision making.
- Participatory workshops and forums between students and administrators.
- Engagement at all levels to ensure efficient information dissemination within all spheres of university.
- Elected student leadership must engage students and not make decisions that are politically motivated.
- Using the voting system.
- Fair representation of students across departments.

These responses indicate a willingness by students to be involved and engaged in governance issues through dialogue and participatory engagement (Luescher et al., 2016).

Technology has become central to education and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic made it more apparent that the new African university has to make it a priority. The researcher asked students how the new African university should involve students in ensuring effective and efficient utilisation of ICTs. Students indicated that the recent COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inequalities between students with some failing to access technology due to economic challenges. In light of this challenge, student respondents suggested that in the new African university, public–private partnerships should be developed to assist students in acquiring the required gadgets and technology support, such as affordable data and efficient campus wi-fi, to enable full participation by students. Others suggested blended learning, which considers both online and one-on-one learning models. With electricity continually being cut off, 90% of students suggested that the government and relevant stakeholders consider solar energy as the main source of power in academic institutions to reduce power loss that affects technology use. The importance of lecturers getting training in technology use and integration was raised because most students felt that the quality of lectures delivered during online learning was largely affected by the inability to use technology by some lecturers. Providing techno spaces that are user friendly would also make the university more inclusive. As opined by Dunne and Zanstra (2011), giving students an opportunity to generate their own ideas makes them co-creators and co-owners of universities, and brings about positive change that is key in achieving set outcomes. The suggestions by students show that engaging students as evaluators of university experiences can potentially improve quality.

In a follow up question, the researcher asked respondents what they envisioned in the new African university. They said they envision a university in which student voices are heard and supported by providing affordable and equal access to education, creating an environment that nurtures inclusivity and diversity as well as creates and promotes balance between education and socio-economic conditions of

students. They further pointed to a university that prioritises better quality and learning standards; better cohesion, cooperation, and communication between administration and students; provision of more funding for students from low-income families; and a listening leadership that takes serious consideration of students concerns. The new African university, according to the majority of students who participated in this study, should be able to hire and produce, not only educated or certified academics, but highly intellectual individuals.

The most common response among the students related to the availability of efficient online systems and platforms. Student 23 stressed the importance of “a university with proper IT infrastructure and flexible learning models with student engagements being at the forefront.” The implication of this desire by students indicates how technology has become a key component for teaching and learning in higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the technology gaps and effect of the digital divide on students, and the level of technological preparedness within higher education institutions. Many (70%) of the respondents identified lack of access to technology as one of the factors that disturbed online learning hence, they envision the new African university to have adequate access to technology that is affordable to all students regardless of socio-economic background. It would be highly interesting to further engage students and SRCs across Africa in designing and proposing higher education models for the new African university in terms of academic aspects (programme structures and learning models), students’ welfare, funding, and administrative issues relevant to students’ life at university.

Changing the Trajectory Towards a New African University

To ensure the shaping of a new African university that is robust and provides meaningful contribution to society, it is important to consider setting up SRCs that are representative of each of the faculties in the institution by the students’ body. The selected SRC representatives should engage all students to ensure full representation of concerns. University administration must give thought to the involvement of students, through said council, in decisions that directly affect students. Both students and university administration must avoid physical confrontation and students’ protests through inclusive and participatory involvement. This should emanate from university administrators being transparent, especially with the financial position of the institution so that students do not base their conclusion on assumptions.

To the politician, the continued clashes between students and administrators is a sign of a revolution and political interest by students, yet the researcher believes that these are cries for attention—for a voice in issues affecting the daily conditions of university students. It is a pointer to the inadequacies of the higher education decision-making system that is authoritarian in nature, exclusory in decision making, and generally dictatorial both in structure and processes (Mashayamombe & Nomvete, 2021). The perception by students is that when institutional management ignores their petitions and statements, they can only

be forced by confrontational physical violence to address their grievances. The envisaged new African university needs to move away from student violence as a mechanism for attaining set goals and coercing university management to listen to student needs and concerns. The new African university must speak and practise inclusivity in all its spheres. It must seek to understand genuine student concerns through participatory student involvement and dialogue.

Assumptions of what students want should not be used to make decisions; rather, consultative and inclusive stakeholder connections must be employed to garner thoughts and ideas around key issues that end up affecting students in higher education. It is critical to develop systems that allow for dialogue and transparency so there are not assumptions with regards to the needs of students in higher education (Davids & Waghid, 2020; Fomunyam, 2017). Students in higher education are key to development at global level, therefore universities must accord them the opportunity to exercise the skills that the global community will require post graduation. The four important roles that students need to play as part of student-inclusive governance in higher education should focus on students as evaluators of the curriculum, students as participants in planning and executing functions that advance university goals, students as partners, and students as change agents as reflected in the model by Dunne and Zanstra (2011). Prescribing the needs, and ignoring the voices, of African students has led to continued strife between university administrators and students thus leading to contemptuous relationships that do not support development (Holdt, 2012).

Giving students a voice and a role in university governance is key in shaping a generation that co-creates and co-owns university objectives and goals. In this way, they will be willing to protect university legacies and fight against rampant and unnecessary destruction of university property and the future of higher education (Daniel, 2018). The new African university has to forge ahead together with students rather than viewing students as mere consumers of what universities offer.

Conclusion

The recurring violence in university student protests—marked by torched buildings, burnt cars, and even loss of life—reveals a profound disconnect between students and university administrators. This pattern underscores the marginalisation of students in higher education governance, where their concerns often go unheard until expressed through extreme actions. A truly transformative African university must decolonise traditional higher education governance processes and systems by fostering inclusive dialogue, prioritising student voices, and embedding them at the core of decision-making processes. The future of higher education in Africa depends on institutions that recognise students not as outsiders, but as essential stakeholders in shaping a system that serves them.

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Determinants of Translanguaging Pedagogy Acceptance and Uptake in Multilingual University Classroom Discourses⁵

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the determinants of university students' acceptance and use of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms in Johannesburg, South Africa. Students in this context have largely been socialised into normative monolingual pedagogies that favour English. However, recent research has seen a paradigm shift, which highlights the limitations and inadequacies of these approaches in multilingual classes, where the language of instruction is not the mother tongue of most students. Research has also highlighted the benefits of translanguaging in such settings, benefits that transcends academia. While studies on translanguaging are gaining traction, there is a paucity of research that reflects on the determinants of translanguaging acceptance and uptake. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study used a qualitative interpretive approach. Two focus group interviews consisting of seven and eight participants respectively, were conducted. Findings reveal that several factors determine translanguaging acceptance and uptake, and these include prior experience in translanguaging, aligning home languages to languages of the classroom, student-parent/guardian attitudes towards Indigenous languages, and intellectualisation of Indigenous languages and resource development, among others. The study emphasises that the efficacy and effectiveness of translanguaging in learning and teaching alone is insufficient for its successful implementation in this domain. It is hoped that these results contribute towards ensuring that measures are put in place to harness, and fully realise, the benefits offered by translanguaging in multilingual classrooms discourses.

Keywords: translanguaging, multilingualism, monolingualism, determinants, classroom discourse

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Introduction

Issues of multilingualism and multilinguality are a reality in Africa in general, and in the linguistically and culturally diverse nation of South Africa, the country under study. Communities are multilingual and multicultural and diverse languages have been in peaceful co-existence before the genesis of institutionalised language planning and language policies. Colonialism and globalisation also added linguistic species to an already superdiverse ecology. Through language contact, people have learned to navigate through languages in their ecologies for communication purposes. In such linguistic and culturally diverse communities, the use of more than one language is therefore common and considered the norm in most domains of language use.

Although the use of more than one language is usually the norm in everyday communication, particularly by Indigenous communities, the education domain remains an area of plurilinguistic exclusion. Contrary to the provisions of both the South African Constitution and the South African Language in Education Policy that promotes linguistic diversity in the education domain through additive bilingualism (Department of Education, 1997), the South African classroom context is characterised by monolingual pedagogy ideology and practice, with English and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans playing monopoly as languages of learning, teaching, and assessment for all content subjects. Learners, students, educators, lecturers, and parents alike have been socialised into normative models of language practices that lean towards monolingual practices. These monolingual practices tend to favour languages of wider communication, with most formerly colonised polities inheriting colonial language-in-education policies. Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho inherited English, Mozambique inherited Portuguese, and South Africa inherited English and Afrikaans as languages of teaching, learning, and assessment by default. Monolingual education practices look at linguistic diversity as a problem, as characterised through the lens of Ruiz's (1984) language orientation. Proponents of the monolingual bias believe in the superiority of some languages over others. For them, linguistic diversity in the classroom is therefore a problem that should be shunned. Although the South African Constitution and national education policies recognise the country's multilingual nature, English still remains the dominant language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in higher education institutions. This incongruence between policy and practice in some instances reflects the ideologies that people hold about languages. The lack of political will with regard to developing, modernising, and intellectualising Indigenous languages also reflects the same.

The 21st century has however seen a paradigm shift towards flexible language practices in the classroom after realising the negative impact of monolingual pedagogies in multilingual contexts, particularly in circumstances where the language of academics is not part of the local endoglossic linguistic ecology. In South Africa, English monolingual classroom language practices have created uneven scales with non-English first language learners starting school at a disadvantage (UNESCO, 2015). According to Trudell & Young (2016), monolingual education has also failed, in most cases, to meet the needs and demands of learners whose first language is not the LoLT. The South Africa Department of Education has acknowledged that the absence of the mother tongue in the classroom has resulted in the failures witnessed year after year. This has created some degree of social injustice and violation of human linguistic rights. The paradigm shift is therefore an attempt at correcting this anomaly and at the same time, offering local learners an opportunity to learn in languages they know best (UNESCO, 2015). Post 1994, South Africa's policies have advocated for the inclusion of Indigenous languages in education, though challenges remain in achieving parity among these languages. English, despite its dominance, is a second or third language for many students, presents barriers to academic success and participation (Makalela, 2016). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2020) has emphasised the underutilisation of

Indigenous languages in higher education and has called for strategies to strengthen these languages as languages of academic discourse.

The shift towards flexible language practice in the classroom has ushered in a wide array of possible and related alternatives, all pointing to the idea that classrooms that are linguistically heterogeneous should use whatever linguistic resources at their disposal for meaning making and the enhancement of teaching and learning. These pedagogical alternatives include, but are not limited to metrolingualism, flexible bilingualism (Creese & Blackledge, 2010), translanguaging—the focus of this study (García, 2009; Makalela, 2016)—and hybrid language practice. All these alternatives work on the premise that “teachers and learners should have the freedom to negotiate meaning through whichever linguistic resources are available to them, rather than stipulating which languages should be used at any given time” (Willans, 2013, p. 546). These plurilingual pedagogies therefore look at linguistic diversity as a resource (Ruiz, 1984), as opposed to monolingual pedagogies that frame linguistic diversity in the classroom as a problem.

Within the South African education space, translanguaging, which involves fluid language practices that draw on all available linguistic resources of bilingual and multilingual individuals, has been identified as a promising pedagogical approach, particularly in classrooms characterised by linguistic superdiversity. This language practice involves the use of different linguistic resources—whether it is switching between languages or drawing on elements of more than one language simultaneously—in both speaking and writing. In the university context, it represents an opportunity to dismantle barriers that often prevent students from fully engaging in academic work. There is substantial literature on translanguaging as a befitting alternative within the South African context (Makalela, 2016; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2021; Yafele & Motlhaka, 2021). Most of these studies show how translanguaging as a pedagogic alternative can be incorporated into the South African classroom context as well as explain the importance of linguistic fluidity in the classroom context. Research has also highlighted the advantages that come with employing translanguaging pedagogies in linguistically superdiverse classroom contexts, advantages that transcend academia and correct social, economic, and even political injustices of the past.

However, in as much as findings from literature are novel and point to the advantages offered by translanguaging, there seems to be little or no evidence of translanguaging acceptance and uptake, particularly in South Africa. There is also a dearth of literature that explores factors and conditions that determine the acceptance and uptake of translanguaging, thus ensuring smooth and effective implementation of these novel ideas. I argue that these factors and conditions are crucial considering that they would usher pedagogic transformation into a context where monolingual pedagogy has been the norm for a long time. It is equally important to understand that acceptance of any preferred pedagogic alternative by the stakeholders it is intended to serve will go a long way in easing its implementation and thereby enabling the harnessing of the benefits it brings. I concur with Fullan (2007) who argued that building a shared vision is necessary for the successful development of educational concepts and change. Considering the above discussion, this study aims to explore determinants of acceptance and uptake of plurilinguistic classroom practices by university students with particular reference to translanguaging within the linguistically diverse context of Johannesburg, South Africa where the default language of teaching, learning, and assessment is English. The study therefore responds to the following research question: “What are the determinants of translanguaging acceptance and uptake in university classroom discourses from students’ perspective?” The main objective is thus to identify factors that would lead to the successful implementation of translanguaging at university level.

Literature Review

Studies on translanguaging within the context of education have recently gained traction in South Africa. The concept of translanguaging was first introduced by Cen Williams in 1994, based on his studies in bilingual schools in Wales where learners would read and listen in one language then speak and write in another, thereby integrating and not separating bi- or multiple languages. Translanguaging-informed scholarship has thus endeavoured to shift the monolingual bias deeply rooted in language education and advocate for linguistic justice for bi/multilinguals (Sembiente & Tian, 2023). Although Williams (1994) originally coined the Welsh term *trawsieithu*, Baker (2003) later translated it into English as translanguaging. Researchers have looked at translanguaging from different perspectives. Research is replete with studies that establish the effectiveness of translanguaging as a resource in helping multilingual students to comprehend academic texts:

Classroom translanguaging offers cognitive, socio-cognitive and affective benefits to students. It frees students from monolingual chains of violence and violations, chains that strip children/learners of their home and community languages inclusive of the cultural vestiges that they employ every day for discussion and communicative purposes . . . children/learners get methodically disrobed and deprived of their integrity, independence, freedom, and voice. (Yafele & Motlhaka, 2021, p. 2120)

These authors also alluded to the usefulness of learners' cultural repertoires as resources in teaching and learning. Translanguaging thus brings Indigenous knowledge systems into the classroom to help with meaning making and comprehension. The importance of Indigenous knowledge systems embedded in local languages was also acknowledged by Nyamupangedengu and Khupe (2024). Translanguagers, according to García (2009, p. 47), are capable of "convey[ing] not only linguistic knowledge, but also combined cultural knowledge that comes to bear upon language use."

Australian researchers have documented the significance of recognising doctoral education as a multilingual space where doctoral students' multilingual repertoire should be legitimatised as a source of knowledge production (Liu et al., 2025). Research has shown that the power and usefulness of translanguaging goes beyond undergraduate teaching to postgraduate research. Supervisors have realised that languages are not only linguistic entities but that they provide access to wells of knowledge; "from this perception, translanguaging has the potential to be an effective concept for interpreting and scrutinising supervision episodes involving multilingual doctoral students and their supervisors" (Liu et al., 2025, p. 3). Translanguaging thus offers advantages that go beyond languages as modes for enhancing communication to opportunities for harnessing knowledge beyond monolingual pedagogies.

According to Rabbidge (2019), vague language policies in educational settings can impact teachers, who may prioritise one language over another based on their personal beliefs or socio-historical influences. The author links the success of classroom translanguaging with the quality of the language policy an institution might develop, and how it could unintentionally hinder the development of translanguaging spaces. Some language policies may favour certain languages and create a view that other languages are not as superior as the ones being used in the institution, therefore teachers may develop beliefs based on such language policies and end up prioritising some languages and leaving out others—which may negatively impact on the languages that are denied access in the classroom.

Previous researches have also shown challenges in implementing translanguaging in multilingual classrooms. Ticheloven et al. (2021) addressed the challenging task of establishing meaningful translanguaging in multilingual classrooms, which they contended necessitates negotiation between different stakeholders. Their study aimed to identify concrete challenges regarding translanguaging from

the perspective of scholars, teachers, and students. These participants agreed in some instances, but showed lack of consensus in various other issues. Ticheloven et al.'s (2021) results showed that challenges emerged at and within different levels—at the classroom level (undesired effects of translanguaging such as linguistic isolation and discomfort, teachers failing to keep up with discussions) and at the individual level (attitudes and affective challenges). This implies that implementing translanguaging in the classroom and taking everybody on board is not an easy albeit necessary task. Stakeholders thus have to be intentional about conditions for the acceptance, uptake, and comfort in translanguaging for both students and lecturers.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), a psychological theory developed by Icek Ajzen (1991) to explain how people's attitudes, social pressures, and perceived control influence their intentions and behaviours. TPB is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (which focused only on attitudes and subjective norms) by adding a third factor: perceived behavioural control. The TPB works on the premise that human behaviour is guided by three key factors that shape a person's intention to perform a behaviour, and this intention is the main determinant of whether the behaviour will occur. Intention, according to TPB is determined by three factors. The first factor is attitude towards behaviour. This talks to one's evaluation of performing the behaviour. The evaluation is focused on whether the behaviour will have positive or negative impact. Attitude towards a particular behaviour is therefore influenced by beliefs about the outcome of the behaviour. The second determinant is subjective norms. These norms are influenced by perceived social pressure from others. Lastly, is perceived behavioural control. With this factor, intention is determined by one's belief in their ability to perform the behaviour, taking into account challenges they may face and the availability of resources. This TPB was preferred because issues of language use are determined by choices that people make, choices that may be influenced by beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies among other things. The theory offers a way of exploring what influences students to make particular language choices and how students' attitudes, social expectations, and perceived control shape their language practices. Understanding these influences provides guidance towards ensuring that necessary plans are put in place to enable translanguaging in educational settings.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative phenomenological design to explore factors that determine translanguaging acceptance and uptake in university classrooms from the students' lens. The essence of the qualitative phenomenological design lies in the assumption that there is no single reality and that reality is understood from the perspectives of those who live it (Teherani et al., 2015). In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research, or that writers express in the literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through this design, students were given voice to express their subjective realities, experiences, interpretations, and perceptions on the determinants of translanguaging acceptance and uptake in university classrooms. Students were thus placed at the centre of this research. Understanding students' views on the matter was deemed crucial in the successful implementation of translanguaging in the classrooms because students are not only interested parties in the whole matrix, they are part of the end users and intended beneficiaries of translanguaging.

Population, Sampling, and Data Gathering

The research site for this study was a metropolitan university in Johannesburg, South Africa. Johannesburg is an educational hub that is home to students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, making it

a fertile site for translanguaging studies. The population for the study was drawn from the university's student population, in particular, those in the School of Languages studying towards undergraduate and honours degrees. The rationale for this population group was driven by the fact that translanguaging is a topic in their Sociolinguistics and Multilingualism in Training and Education modules so the research topic was not new to the students. It was also based on the fact that the School had already initiated translanguaging practices in their tutorial sessions. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for the study. The selection criteria used were that participants should be students registered in the School of Languages, in their second or third year of study or studying towards an honours degree, and that students should be competent in two or more languages. Invitation to participate in the study was posted on Blackboard, the learning management system used by the University as well as the department's physical notice boards. Those who showed interest approached the researcher who explained the study process to the prospective participants. Those who chose to participate were then given consent forms, which they signed prior to participating.

Focus group interviews were adopted for the study. Focus group discussions are a vital method in qualitative research because they provide rich, in-depth insights into participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. By bringing together a diverse group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, researchers can observe the dynamics of group interaction, uncover shared beliefs, and explore the reasons behind certain opinions, choices, or behaviours. Fifteen students volunteered to participate so the researcher conducted two focus group interviews with seven and eight participants, respectively. The sample was divided into two groups based on the availability of participants and also, to ensure that everybody was given enough time to discuss the issue at hand in detail. The two groups consisted of participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds, thus ensuring a range of perspectives on language practices in education. This interactive setting stimulated participants to express ideas that I believe might not have been revealed in individual interviews, thus allowing me to capture a broader range of perspectives. Furthermore, the dialogue among participants highlighted areas of consensus or divergence within the group. This provided opportunities for enhanced depth and validity of the research findings.

An interview schedule was used to guide the discussion (see Appendix 1). Questions for discussion were primarily asked in English. The follow-up discussion was also primarily in English although participants were given the option to engage in other languages in their linguistic repertoires. Data from the discussions were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. I read through the data several times to familiarise myself with them before manually generating initial codes and searching for themes. Identified themes were then reviewed and named and lastly, a report was produced.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were followed in this study. Approval to carry out the study was obtained from the university. Participants were neither forced nor coerced into taking part; they volunteered and willingly signed informed consent forms. Although there was no unforeseen harm expected, the university's student psychological services unit was informed so that they would be on standby. Anonymity in the write up was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. The interviews took place in a seminar room used by students for seminars, workshops, and tutorials. Apart from ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness were also taken into consideration. Member checking was used as one way of ensuring study's trustworthiness. I shared preliminary findings with participants to ensure accuracy.

Limitations

Although the study relied on in-depth discussions, it focused on one school within a single university faculty. Perspectives from other schools and faculties of the university may have been missed. Due to this, results may not be generalised. A broader and more inclusive study that includes other stakeholders like lecturers, scholars, and administrators might be required.

Findings

The study aimed to identify factors that determine the acceptance and uptake of translanguaging pedagogies in university classrooms. Data were collected, through focus group interviews, from a student population of a university in Johannesburg. Table 1 below presents the study's participant linguistic profile.

Table 1

Participant Pseudonyms and Linguistic Profile

Pseudonym	English	Xitsonga	Venda	Afrikaans	Ndebele	Sepedi	Sotho	Tswana	Zulu
Bongi	√				√			√	√
Amanda	√		√			√			√
John	√								
Dineo	√						√		
Sibahle	√			√	√				√
Arjun	√								
Mary	√		√		√				
Rhulani	√	√	√						√
Hambe	√							√	√
Estelle	√			√					
Langa	√								
Kotani	√	√	√			√			
Mpho	√								
Tumi	√							√	√
Teboho	√	√	√						

Findings from the discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. The data were analysed through the theoretical lens of TPB. The following themes speak to what students see as determinants of translanguaging acceptance and uptake: 1) prior experience in translanguaging, 2) aligning home languages to languages of the classroom, 3) debunking the perceived nexus between English and academic currency, 4) student-parent/guardian attitudes towards Indigenous languages, 5) language policy implementation in higher education institutions, 6) intellectualisation of Indigenous languages and resource development, and 7) synchronising the LoLT and language of assessment.

Prior Experience in Translanguaging

Participants reported varying levels of prior experience with translanguaging. Some students reported that they had been exposed to fluid multilingual practices in their communities and found this exposure useful in navigating multilingual classroom interactions, while others expressed discomfort due to a lack of prior experience with such pedagogies. What became clear from the discussion was the contrasting experiences in language use between students living in townships and who went to high schools in townships, and those from affluent suburbs who went to private schools. According to Bonggi: "Translanguaging is the in thing, that's what we do ekasi every day maam, at home, in the street and in the classroom, even the teachers do the same."

For students who identify with Bonggi, their experience with translanguaging in day-to-day interactions provides a smooth transition to classroom translanguaging. Amanda further indicated that they enjoy tutorials from the African languages modules because "that's how we communicate all the

time.” Note that the African Languages Department of this institution encourages the use of African languages during tutorial sessions.

On the other hand, students like John found it uncomfortable to include any other language in the classroom except for English because they have never experienced it in their homes nor in primary or high school. Participants who identified with John’s view are monolingual English speakers (of White, Black, and Indian races). Dineo, Mary, and Tumi do practice translanguaging in their social interactions but were discouraged from using indigenous languages, particularly in high school and had been engaged in monolingual English interactions in their first and second years of study in University. Due to this experience, they found translanguaging to be “abnormal” in university classroom spaces.

Aligning Home Languages to Languages of the Classroom

The focus group interviews brought to the fore the mismatch between the Indigenous languages (ILs) used at home, and those in the classroom, namely, the standard languages. The students indicated that in as much as they wanted to use their languages in the classrooms, they had come to the realisation that there is incongruence between the ILs and the standard languages. Rhulani, a Venda mother tongue speaker indicated that they were allowed to use English and Venda in high school but the problem according to this participant was that “the Tshivenda that the teachers want is not the same as the one we use at home.” The discussion around this incongruence further indicated that such differences can impact engagement—the implication being that learning in the standard languages requires extra effort. There was a general consensus among participants that it might actually be easier for non-mother tongue speakers of ILs to learn and use ILs because they do not have to unlearn anything at this level.

Debunking the Perceived Nexus Between English and Academic Currency

A prevalent issue that also came out from the discussion was the association of English and academic currency, sometimes referred to as the academic lingua. While participants believed that English is crucial for academic and professional success, they lamented the marginalisation and linguistic repression of ILs, which they believed are also carriers of wealthy of information. However, despite the knowledge embodied in these languages, some students hold the perception that ILs cannot be used for academic discourse, reinforcing a hierarchical view of languages, which places English in its own league in relation to ILs. There are students who believe that certain knowledge cannot be disseminated or taught in African languages. The following excerpts reflect some students’ perception of their languages with regards to their use in academia:

Many of the subject matter being presented to us cannot be translated into these languages properly, if at all. It is because the subject was not made with these languages in mind, only English and many European languages. (Rhulani)

We all know *ukhuti* [that] our African languages are limited. Imagine doing Engineering in isiHlubi guys *akukhonakali* [it is impossible]. (Sibahle)

Although the perceptions may not hold true, and may not be linguistically justified, the responses are validated by institutions’ over-reliance on English and, to some extent, Afrikaans monolingual pedagogies despite prevailing multilingual policies in higher education. Kaschula and Maseko (2014, p. 26) indicated that 23 South African universities have adopted a language policy that favours the promotion of African ILs, however, “only a handful have implementation plans and actively promote African languages in their teaching acts.” The non-existence or scarcity of these teaching acts as well as teaching and learning resources in ILs in institutions of higher education help perpetuate the myth that African languages are not fit for academia and in turn, this continues to valorise Western epistemologies. ILs continue to be viewed through an intellectual deficit lens, seen as inferior or unsuitable for academic discourse. This erroneous assumption further leads to students coming from these looked-down-on linguistic backgrounds lacking confidence in using their languages in the classrooms.

Student-Parent/Guardian Attitudes Towards ILs

The linguistic profile of the participants indicated that a majority of them spoke two or more languages. These languages are however valued and looked at differently by different participants. A key issue that came out of this is students’ attitudes toward the languages within their linguistic repertoires.

These attitudes often reflect a compartmentalised view of language, where different languages are associated with specific functions or domains—a phenomenon associated with linguistic functional division of labour. Students tend to exhibit positive attitudes toward dominant languages, such as English, which is perceived as prestigious and instrumental in accessing educational and employment opportunities. When asked which languages they would consider translanguaging in, positivity was not directed towards English alone, dominant endoglossic languages isiZulu, isiXhosa, and SeSotho were also found to be languages of preference, the motivation being their hegemonic tendencies towards other endoglossic languages as well as their level of development.

Some participants indicated that while they would not have any problems with some endoglossic languages like isiZulu, SeSotho, and isiXhosa in the classroom, there were some languages that they believed could not be used in the classrooms. Asked which ones and why, participants believed that some linguistic codes could not be considered as languages, and pointed out Setokwa, isiBhaca, isiHlubi. Participants also indicated that some languages were too minor to be used in the classrooms. Ndebele, SiSwati, Xitsonga were mentioned despite them comprising part of the country's 12 official languages. What is noteworthy is that mother tongue speakers of languages like Xitsonga indicated that even though they were willing to take up translanguaging in classroom interactions, they would not feel comfortable doing it in their own languages because of the perceptions that other language speakers have about their languages, “maybe if the government develops our language like they did for isiZulu, or maybe one day when others see us like part of them,” said frustrated Xitsonga first language speaker, Kotani. Interestingly, this was supported by both dominant and non-dominant language speakers, alike. Thus, there was a consensus on the view of some languages as minor, inadequate, and lacking in academic utility. These attitudes directly influence students' willingness or intention to engage in classroom translanguaging practices in these languages. So although participants showed some willingness to translanguage, acceptance and uptake is not open to all ILs. Attitude towards languages determines take up. According to Mabaso (2018), the VaTsonga people were, at some stage, looked down upon as an ethnic group and this negative attitude created such an inferiority complex within some of the VaTsonga that it can still be felt. Apart from student attitudes, society also mirrors these language attitudes, contributing to the broader linguistic hierarchy observed in educational settings. According to Hambe, her grandmother who is working hard to provide for her university education expects her to speak fluent English:

She [the grandmother] sends me to school to learn more English. She does not expect me to be taught in my home language. I don't tell about the struggles that I go through because of this English.

Another student, Teboho lamented the pressure that communities back home put upon them to speak in English, and show other community members how much they have achieved. These societal perceptions contribute to the linguistic choices students make in classrooms, choices that further entrench the dominance of English and shape translanguaging behaviour. Asked how they would respond to such challenges, the participants indicated that they would choose English.

Language Policy Implementation in Higher Education Institutions

The language in education policy of South Africa (Department of Education, 1997) and the Language Policy for Higher Education (DHET, 2002) are clear on the issue of accommodating official ILs in the education space. Most higher education institutions even have their own local multilingual policies drawn from the national policy. Asked whether they knew their institution's language policy, most students indicated that they did not know, and that they just assumed that it was English because they were using English only, particularly for lectures and assessments. Some students were not happy that their languages were left out: “fhedzi why hu si Venda?” queried Teboho. However, there was a consensus on the need

for institutions to start implementing their language policies in earnest. Participants in this study felt that if institutions enforced implementation of their multilingual language policies, then students and lecturers alike would be left with no alternative but to employ multilingual pedagogies

Intellectualisation of ILs and Resource Development

Apart from issues of language attitudes and ideologies, students also highlighted issues of lexical deficiency and the underdevelopment of ILs. They indicated that sometimes the will to accommodate ILs in the classroom is there, but their current status hinders their effective use and renders them unfit for the classroom:

Half the time I am forced to continue struggling with English because of lack of certain terms in my language. After all, we do not have textbooks to refer to like we do for English. (Hambe)

This participant alludes to the idea that ILs are not only found wanting in terms of lexical equivalence but there is also a scarcity of learning resources in those languages. From the discussion on preferred languages for classroom translanguaging discussed above, participants leaned towards isiZulu, SeSotho, and isiXhosa “because of their level of development,” according to Bongzi. This perception that, unlike English, ILs are not adequately developed to cope with modern terminologies of various fields of knowledge is not new (Khumalo, 2017; Khumalo & Nkomo, 2022). The need to modernise and intellectualise ILs emerged strongly; “an intellectualised language is one that can be used for educating a person in any field of knowledge from preschool to university and beyond” (Sibayan, 1991, p. 229). These processes are also the basis for the development of teaching and learning resources in ILs. Whilst intellectualisation of ILs and development of teaching and learning resources in ILs have been identified in this study as determinants of classroom translanguaging uptake, Siziba (2024) advised that the use of African languages should not wait for intellectualisation to be accomplished first, but that both processes should take place simultaneously. According to Bamgbose (2011, pp. 3–4):

Experience has shown that while expanding vocabulary by creating terminology, competing terms emerge through the actual use of a language by different stakeholders, such as teachers, writers, and media practitioner.

Synchronising LoLT and Language of Assessment

The group also discussed the non-alignment of LoLT and language of assessment with reference to ILs. Rhulani questioned the value of translanguaging in teaching and learning but not assessments:

But, how does it help to discuss stuff in our vernacular and still be required to write assignments, tests, exams in English? Even when we did presentations, about our own cultures like in one of my module, they still want English. This is why some of us still fail even when I know the stuff.

For this student, translanguaging is only helpful when it is also used for assessments. While some students concurred with Rhulani, others indicated that they preferred writing assessments in English.

Discussion

Findings from this study have brought to the fore a number of issues. Based on TPB, the findings illustrate how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape the acceptance and uptake of translanguaging in higher education institutions. From this discussion, it is clear that prior experience with translanguaging plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards translanguaging uptake in the classroom. Those with prior experience tended to perceive translanguaging positively, indicating confidence and willingness to use it. Those who lacked prior experience indicated discomfort and a negative attitude towards classroom translanguaging. This suggests that perceived behavioural control is a key determinant of uptake. Findings further indicate that attitudes towards uptake are also influenced

by subjective norms or social pressures. Participants from *ekasi* [townships] experienced strong enabling norms from both their communities and high school classrooms, thus reinforcing translanguaging acceptance and uptake at university level. It is therefore crucial that classroom translanguaging practices are implemented and supported from the lower levels of education. In this way, students would find it normal to translanguage at every level of their education.

Findings from this study revealed that students would be comfortable with classroom translanguaging in their actual home languages. The mismatch between home languages and standard languages has also been mentioned by Makoni et al. (2007), who argued that standard languages are social constructs unrelated to learners' mother tongues or the languages that students use at home—they are, in effect, mother tongues in search of speakers. Cook (2009) in their study of language use in Tlhabane and Phokeng in the North West Province of South Africa concurred with Makoni et al. (2007). The findings of the latter study revealed that most school children's home language in their study was not standard Setswana but street Setswana. In other words, standard languages cannot be the basis of classroom language practices because their effect may be similar to using English, which is a second or third language for most students. The effect of the mismatch is exacerbated by the fact that ILs have intra-language variations, particularly where vocabulary is concerned. These variations, in most cases, mark regional or geographical realisations of the same language. Again, standard languages ignore such dimensions of intra-language variation (Weber & Horner, 2017), thereby denying students the opportunity to make use of the resources they have in their linguistic repertoires for meaning making. Allowing languages and their inter- and intra-variations is therefore considered a determinant for translanguaging. Ruiz's (1984) resource and rights dimensions are aptly captured in translanguaging and work not only toward academic success but also, as conduits for social justice against standard language ideologies and monolingual pedagogies, which according to Cooper, (2010, p. 238) "do not improve but rather debilitate language and deprive humans of the resources that enable them to make meanings flexibly in response to ever-changing conditions". Aligning home languages and languages of the classroom was therefore found to strengthen positive attitudes towards acceptance and uptake.

The findings also highlight the complex interplay between student and society attitudes, language ideologies, and societal perceptions in shaping translanguaging practices within university classrooms. Subjective norms, particularly students' and society's attitudes towards ILs were found to have significant influence on translanguaging uptake. Dragojevic (2017) argued that our attitudes towards language may have multitudinous behavioural consequences, particularly negative attitudes perpetuating discrimination, problematic social interactions, and biases against not only minority languages, but endoglossic languages in general. Positive societal perceptions on classroom translanguaging encourages greater confidence in engaging ILs in classroom discourses. In the same manner, the extent to which higher education institutions implement multilingual policies gives students perceived control, normalises translanguaging, and fosters institutional legitimacy. Language planning agencies, such as government departments and language boards or academies, together with higher education institutions are therefore pivotal policy instruments in bridging gaps between policy (intention) and implementation (performance) (Beukes, 2009).

There is a need to also inculcate a sense of pride in students in ILs, awareness in parents on the usefulness of mother tongue languages in education, demystify Anglo-normative language ideologies that solely valorise English, and the assumption that people will and should be skilled in English, and that they are defective if they are not (Mckiney & Norton, 2008). Unless and until attitudes toward ILs change, ILs will continue to be viewed through a deficit lens—seen as inferior or unsuitable for academic discourse. Anglo-normativity, a colonial legacy, reflects negatively on non-English fluent speakers and their languages because it paints a picture of intellectual deficiency. This erroneous assumption further leads to students

from these looked-down-on linguistic backgrounds lacking confidence in using their languages in the classrooms.

Findings also point to the intellectualisation of ILs and the development of resources as determinants of translanguaging acceptance and uptake. ILs attract negative attitudes due to inadequate development. Without adequate development and resources, students may perceive limited control over their ability to use ILs in higher education. On the other hand, development enhances perceived behavioural control. Associated with the issue of ILs valorisation is the need to align the LoLT with the language of assessment. Institutions and lecturers alike are therefore encouraged to rethink assessment methods and create spaces in the assessment policies where translanguaging is accommodated, spaces that are more inclusive. This alignment would challenge the myth that English holds exclusive academic value, thereby debunking the nexus between English and academic currency. From a TPB perspective, such shifts in belief systems are crucial in shaping intentions to engage with translanguaging.

Overall, findings from this study have highlighted the influence that ideologies and beliefs have on people's perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately, their behaviour (Corbett & Wilson, 2002). Vandeyar (2020) further argued that beliefs, unlike knowledge, tend to be resistant to change. This then calls for concerted efforts from all stakeholders to decolonise this mentality that favours Anglo-normativity. Students need to be made aware of the usefulness of ILs and mother tongues in education from an early age, maybe through practice that normalises classroom translanguaging. Unless this mindset is transformed, classroom translanguaging will remain a good alternative on paper, but not in practice, for most universities despite the literature being replete with studies that attest to its efficacy.

Conclusion

While translanguaging has been shown to offer significant pedagogical advantages, and is found to be a transformative pedagogy, its successful uptake in university classrooms depends on various social, attitudinal, ideological, educational, and policy factors. Among other things, the study highlights the following as determinants for translanguaging acceptance and uptake in university classrooms: prior experience with translanguaging, positive attitudes towards ILs, inclusive policy implementation in higher education institutions, as well as intellectualisation of ILs and resource development. Taken together, the findings underscore the importance of addressing these attitudinal, ideological, and policy barriers in efforts to implement and promote translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy. Encouraging the use of all languages within students' repertoires requires not only institutional support but also a broader cultural shift in how languages are valued and understood. If universities are to serve as inclusive spaces for knowledge production, they must actively work to dismantle the linguistic hierarchies that continue to marginalise non-dominant languages and the students who speak them. However, it is worth noting that there was no complete consensus on all determinants given that there were also divergences on some factors. One thing though remained constant—the need to create a conducive environment for acceptance and uptake of translanguaging pedagogies in university classrooms.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule for Group Discussions

The following were part of the questions that guided the discussion:

1. Given that you have learned about the importance of translanguaging in teaching and learning, and since the School of Languages also encourages it, kindly share your experiences with translanguaging.
2. Given your experiences, would you support and engage in translanguaging in your lectures? Why; why not?
3. For those who have no experience in translanguaging, now that you know what it is and its advantages, would you feel comfortable in classroom translanguaging? (Note that there are some modules without tutorials.)
4. Is there anything that you think should be done to enable you to engage in translanguaging comfortably and effectively in your lectures?
5. Which languages would you consider for translanguaging? What factors guide your choices?
6. What is your university language policy? What languages are included?

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Transformation and Inclusivity in Translanguaging Through Transliteration: Perspectives of isiZulu Home-Language Students on Discipline-Specific Terminology in isiZulu⁶

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Abstract

African students in South Africa, Africa, and the diaspora exhibit a multiplicity of linguistic repertoires. This multiplicity is captured, at macro level, through applying a translanguaging approach to the use of African languages as languages of learning and teaching. To capture this multiplicity at a micro level, University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) employs translanguaging by transliterating English academic concepts into discipline-specific terms in isiZulu. Transliteration creates a phrase that a bilingual isiZulu home-language (L1), English second-language (L2) speaker can understand in both languages. Moreover, transliteration exhibits a transformational and inclusive manner in responding to the academic needs of multilingual African students. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore isiZulu L1 students' perspectives on the transformation and inclusive aspects of the transliterated terms. The study is situated within the interpretive paradigm and employs a qualitative approach. Using focus group interview data (n = 28), the perspectives of isiZulu L1 students on transliterated terms in isiZulu found in the UKZN discipline-specific terminology lists were analysed thematically. The findings from the data endorse the use of transliteration in developing terminologies in isiZulu as a transformative and inclusive approach to the use of African languages in South African higher education. For bilingual isiZulu/English students, transliteration affords invaluable cognitive benefits and confidence in their academic endeavours.

Keywords: transformation, linguistic repertoire, terminology development, translanguaging, transliteration

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⁶ Ethical clearance number: HSS/0755/018D

Introduction and Background

Students of African descent in South Africa bring varied and multiple linguistic repertoires into their classrooms (Chaka, 2024), emanating from numerous factors. Among other factors, the multilingual landscape of the country and the language-offering system at Basic Education level in South Africa contribute to the multiple linguistic repertoires of students of African descent. This multilingual landscape is also reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996), in which 11 languages were accorded official status, namely, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. The recognition of South African Sign Language as the 12th official language was formalised on July 19, 2023 when President Cyril Ramaphosa signed the South African Sign Language Bill into law (RSA, 2023). Even though the Constitution advocates equitable use of all official languages, English has, by default, a hegemonic status in the higher education sector in South Africa (Ndlangamandla & Chaka, 2022). At Basic Education level, in accordance with the Language in Education Policy (RSA, 1997), any of the official languages may be offered either at home language (L1) level, at First Additional Language (FAL) level, or at Second Additional Language (SAL) level (Sibeko & van Zaanen, 2021). Despite the constitutional and policy directives, English is the preferred language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and has a hegemonic status over the rest of the South African official languages (de Wet, 2002).

The hegemony of English downplays the multiplicity of linguistic repertoires that African students whose second language (L2) is English possess. The repercussions of this hegemony permeate the academic performance of these African students. In South African universities, the hegemony of English negatively impacts throughput rates, contributes to high dropout rates, and hinders epistemological access for English L2 students (Ndebele, 2024). Amongst numerous teaching and learning strategies to support English L2 students, translanguaging is purported to mitigate the gaps in English functional proficiency that African students may have developed. The gaps in English functional proficiency result from differing educational experiences at Basic Education level as well as different offerings of English as a subject at this level. African students are not a homogenous group, particularly isiZulu L1/English L2 bilinguals (Sibisi, 2022). Within the group of isiZulu L1/English L2 bilinguals, four subgroups can be identified: proficient bilinguals who are competent in both isiZulu and in English, isiZulu-inclined bilinguals who are more competent in isiZulu than in English; English-inclined bilinguals who are more competent in English than in isiZulu, and mediocre bilinguals who are competent neither in isiZulu nor in English. As Wildsmith-Cromarty and Turner (2018) argued, the functional proficiency of African students in the English language results from the experiences that they are exposed to at school level. Those who have been sent to multicultural schools that use English *de facto* as a medium of instruction have diminished exposure to the African language in the academic domain and so for them, the use of an African language as LoLT at tertiary level remains a challenge (Madlala & Mkhize, 2019). These bilingual students become more inclined towards English and less inclined towards their African home language. In contrast, Maseko and Mkhize (2021) argued that for those students who have been sent to township schools, English, compared to isiZulu, is not easily accessible. These bilingual students become more inclined towards their home language and less inclined towards English. This gap in functional proficiency in English is transposed to their academic endeavours. Therefore, translanguaging through transliteration helps bridge the challenges posed by the differing language exposures of African students in the South African higher education domain.

At University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN, 2014), translanguaging is supported by the university's bilingual language policy, which advocates the intellectualisation of isiZulu and promotes the use of isiZulu as a LoLT alongside English. To operationalise the policy, UKZN has, to date, developed discipline-specific

terminology lists in isiZulu for a total of 23 disciplines (Khumalo, 2017; Sibisi, 2022). A number of studies have investigated the development of terminologies in isiZulu at UKZN (see for example, Bethke, 2021; Khumalo & Nkomo, 2022; Zungu, 2021), including students' attitudes towards the use of isiZulu and terminologies in isiZulu (see for example, Chetty, 2013; Madlala & Mkhize, 2019; Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2020; Sibisi, 2022). In the studies on attitudes towards terminologies in isiZulu at UKZN, isiZulu L1 students indicated ambivalence, particularly towards the accessibility of the "pure" terms in isiZulu (Chetty, 2013; Madlala & Mkhize, 2019) and indicated a preference for transliterated terms in isiZulu (Sibisi, 2022, p. 227). As an augmentation of the latter study, the objectives of the current paper are as follows:

- To investigate isiZulu L1 students' perceptions on the transformative nature of transliterated terms in isiZulu.
- To determine the extent to which isiZulu L1 students perceive inclusivity in isiZulu transliterated terms in the discipline-specific terminology lists.

Thus, this investigation seeks to address the following questions:

- In what ways do isiZulu L1 students perceive the element of transformation in the transliterated terms in isiZulu?
- To what extent do isiZulu transliterated terms in the discipline-specific terminology lists encompass inclusivity as perceived by isiZulu L1 students?

The paper draws from translanguaging theoretical perspectives to argue that translanguaging purposely validates and integrates all learners' languages, and further views linguistic repertoires as singular, integrated entities that include a variety of modalities. It adopts García's (2009, p. 45) conceptualisation of translanguaging as "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds." To answer the main questions posed, first, a detailed literature review focusing on scholarly perspectives about the transformative potential of translanguaging and the views of both teachers and students about translanguaging is provided. This is followed by a description of the translanguaging theoretical tenets that inform this study. Thereafter, the findings of the study are presented followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

The transformative potential of translanguaging has generated interest in the education sector and has seen growing scholarship across the globe. It is, however, important to put transformation in the South African context in order to appreciate the impact of translanguaging pedagogy on learners. South Africa's transformation agenda is captured in a sequence of policies developed to address this need, resulting in the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, which expresses this need as follows:

[Higher education] must lay the foundations for the development of a learning society which stimulate, direct and mobilize the creative and intellectual energies of all people towards meeting the challenge of reconstruction and development. (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 1997, p. 7)

The abovementioned need emanates from a background of colonial and apartheid legacies of inequality and injustices, hence the need to ensure "increased and broadened participation, responsiveness to societal interests and needs, and cooperation and partnerships in governance" (DBE, 1997, p. 10). These requirements include the need to "increase access for Black, women, disabled, and mature students" and to develop "new curricula and flexible models of learning and teaching, including modes of delivery" (DBE, 1997, p. 10). In the context of language, it has become an undeniable fact that language is critical to higher education transformation because it impacts on access and success and further affirms diversity, while the

use of Indigenous African languages as media of instruction in the higher education sector was affirmed in the language policy for higher education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). In this context, multilingual pedagogies such as translanguaging have become a necessity rather than an option, based on empirical evidence across the globe.

The transformative potential of translanguaging has been acknowledged by various scholars. Anwaruddin (2018) asserted that translanguaging has the likelihood to transform power relations between learners and educators, and to build students' capacity to critically engage with different worldviews. Canagarajah (2018, p. 32) also alluded to the transformative potential of translanguaging in his observations regarding the pedagogy's ability to challenge "understandings of language as regulated or determined by existing contexts of power relations." Additionally, Wei (2024) argued that translanguaging creates opportunities to disrupt institutionalised monolingualism among linguistically diverse learners not only by introducing flexible translanguaging practices and multifaceted transemiotic flows but also by allowing learners to bring their perspectives, individual trajectories, and voices into learning and classroom activities. This promotes social responsiveness to the historical backgrounds and out-of-class lives of students, thereby providing a rich space for the curriculum, in which all identities and histories are presented and celebrated (Wei, 2024). Further, García and Wei (2014, pp. 92–93) viewed translanguaging as "capable of calling forth bilingual subjectivities and sustaining bilingual performances that go beyond one or the other binary logic of two autonomous languages."

Numerous research studies have demonstrated the transformative potential of translanguaging pedagogy across various educational settings (e. g. Esquinca et al., 2014; Hamman et al., 2017 Stewart & Hansen-Thomas, 2016). Further, De Los Ríos and Seltzer (2017) explored the translanguaging phenomenon by analysing the writing of two students who participated in this practice as a way of challenging coloniality in English classrooms. The findings of their study revealed that the translanguaging pedagogies employed by teachers helped to disrupt the innately monolingual and colonial practices of English classrooms through curricula that valued metalinguistic reflections and awareness about own cultural and linguistic identities and incorporated students' diverse language practices to disrupt colonialist ideologies. On a similar note, Infante and Licona (2018) investigated translanguaging in an English-Spanish dual-language middle school science classroom in the context of engagements in scientific argumentation related to issues of biodiversity. Their results showed translanguaging as a linguistically responsive approach that provided emergent bilinguals with an opportunity to gain access to scientific content and practices of the curriculum intervention. In that regard, the relevance of scientific education can be achieved both conceptually and linguistically in relation to learners' discursive language practices beyond the school environment. Additionally, García-Mateus and Palmer (2017) explored the construction of identities of emergent bilingual children in which the teacher employed translanguaging in the classroom. Their findings revealed that translanguaging offered empowering and equitable opportunities for language learning among minoritised bilingual children. Further, it resulted in the development of bilingual identities and creation of metalinguistic awareness. Ritchie (2023) also conducted translanguaging practitioner-based research with a multilingual class of Grade 10 learners during the teaching of one of Shakespeare's works, *Macbeth*. Her study revealed that translanguaging facilitated learners' comprehension of *Macbeth* while simultaneously giving them the capacity to interpret the play from their own cultural and linguistic perspectives and further enabled them to comprehend the plot, themes, and characters of the play.

In addition to demonstrating the transformative potential of translanguaging, research on translanguaging pedagogy has also focused on the perspectives of both teachers and learners on this strategy. In relation to teachers' perspectives, research has shown that on the one hand, most teachers view translanguaging as a positive pedagogic strategy that has multiple benefits while on the other hand,

their views reflect the influence of monolingual ideologies and concerns about policy space for its implementation. In this regard, Cenoz et al. (2024) investigated teachers' perceptions of translanguaging and its role in addressing anxiety in the classroom. The results of this study revealed that teachers believed that students were less anxious and more confident in lessons where translanguaging was employed than in other classes. They also reported that levels of participation, engagement, and comprehension in classroom activities improved and that this improvement was linked to reduced anxiety. In the same vein, Kao's (2023) study explored teachers' perceptions and practices about the translanguaging approach in content and language integrated learning in elementary and secondary school contexts in Taiwan. The results revealed the use of semiotic resources and gestures among elementary English teachers and the use of the first language to reinforce subject learning. The respondents indicated that translanguaging expanded their linguistic practices and promoted the use of other meaning-making signs that are valued less in the school environment.

In another study, Yuvayapan (2019) examined English language teachers' perceptions of translanguaging in Turkey's state and private schools. The findings of that study showed that English as Foreign Language teachers' perceptions did not necessarily align with their practices. While they held positive views about translanguaging in some situations, they indicated that they did not frequently employ this pedagogy because of the expectations of their institutions, colleagues, students, and students' parents. However, most of them employed translanguaging to enable them to devote less time to clarifying lesson content and managing the classroom, and to promote interaction. They believed that the strategy was not instrumental in achieving the long-standing goal of learning English in their teaching. Similarly, Ralushai et al. (2024) in their study on teachers' perceptions of their use of translanguaging pedagogy in teaching English FAL among Grade 7 learners in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, revealed two differentiated strands of the teachers' perceptions of the translanguaging approach. Firstly, most Grade 7 teachers had a positive attitude towards translanguaging pedagogy in the teaching and learning of English FAL, indicating that the alternation and flexible use of Tshivenda L1 and English were instrumental in acceleration and scaffolding of second-language learning. Secondly, the study revealed that some of these Grade 7 English FAL teachers preferred an English-only approach to accelerate the learning of English, and opposed the use of translanguaging in their second-language classrooms. Their position was that Tshivenda L1 and English FAL must be taught in isolation, citing their distinct linguistic systems. Further, the Sefotho (2025) study, which also examined teachers' perception on translanguaging at selected bilingual primary schools in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa, showed that teachers were reluctant to allow the use of multiple languages at the same time in their classrooms. This reluctance was based on biased monolingual ideologies that associate the use of more than one language with language contamination.

In the context of student perceptions, translanguaging was to some extent viewed both positively and negatively by different student groups. Liu et al. (2024) investigated students' perceptions and experiences of translanguaging pedagogy in teaching English for academic purposes in China. Their respondents revealed the value of being able to shift from English to Chinese to enable more effective group discussion, when translating for information purposes, when considering academic concepts and when answering teachers' questions, which led to more efficient and effective classroom interactions. That study also highlighted that teachers' translanguaging practices promoted and facilitated student inclusion and classroom "safety," lessened learner anxiety, and generally assisted co-learning in the classroom, thereby promoting greater learner autonomy. In the same vein, Mbirimi-Hungwe (2021) investigated the views from a linguistically, culturally, and ethnically heterogeneous group of South African multilingual students who were exposed to translanguaging during a group discussion whose goal was to discuss and understand a given academic text. The findings of that study showed that although participants formed a

linguistically diverse group, it did not hinder their understanding of the reading material that they were discussing. Rather, this group of students perceived itself to be related as human beings. For them, it was not about which language was used for discussion; instead, they valued their comprehension of the reading material. Wang and East (2024) explored how beginners in an L2 performed on, and perceived, an online writing test that was designed based on the notion of translanguaging. Their survey found that most students supported the creative design that integrated digital multimodal composition and translanguaging, replacing the monolingually focused handwriting-based test tasks. However, some students were sceptical of the translanguaging approach and found it unexpected, unnecessary, and inauthentic.

Another interesting study is Carstens' (2016) exploration of the use of translanguaging as a strategy to support bi-/multilingual students in acquiring academic literacy in English while promoting the terminologisation of African languages through exploratory scientific talk. With participants drawn from different South African language groups, a mixed bag of perceptions was revealed. Second-language speakers of English from all the represented language groups found the strategy of translanguaging to be beneficial, with cognitive gains featuring as the most prominent benefit to students. The majority believed that translanguaging scaffolded their understanding of the concept of waste management (and its sub-concepts) by painting the bigger picture, simplifying complex concepts, helping them to differentiate among related concepts, and enabling them to express conceptual content. However, the IsiXhosa L1 group members were of the opinion that using their first language complicated instead of simplifying their understanding. The Afrikaans L1 group was more homogeneously in favour of translanguaging than the English L1 group. A possible explanation was that the exposure of the Afrikaans group to English as a scientific language had been limited because all higher cognitive level activities had been performed in Afrikaans prior to enrolment at the university. Despite reservations among some students in the English group, two thirds expressed support for L1 terminologisation. The primary support included social cohesion among speakers of different African languages (ubuntu) and social cohesion among speakers of the same language (identity).

Theoretical Framework

Translanguaging as a theoretical framework is linked to the development of the field of bi-/multilingual education. The term "translanguaging" was coined in 1994 by Cen Williams and his colleagues in their study of Welsh-English bilinguals in Bangor, North Wales. Critically, the most important point is that it was a learner initiative that emerged out of their instinct as bilinguals to resist the imposition of monolingual instructional policies (Wei, 2024). Since then, the concept has gained prominence internationally in the field of education as scholars investigated the theoretical and empirical dimensions of translanguaging as both the "complex practices of plurilingual individuals and communities as well as the pedagogical approaches that use those complex practices" (García & Wei, 2014, p. 3). Numerous definitions of translanguaging and its potential affordances have thus been advanced, challenging the politically and socially defined boundaries of languages and the traditional monolingual approach to teaching that favours English in most parts of the world (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014; Lewis et al., 2012). One of the most comprehensive definitions of translanguaging was provided by Mazak (2017) who combined features of this strategy from the perspectives of various scholars. Translanguaging is thus defined as a complex phenomenon that has the following characteristics:

- (1) a language ideology that sets bilingualism as the norm, (2) a theory of bilingualism that perceives that bilinguals draw from one integrated linguistic repertoire to navigate their bilingual worlds, (3) a pedagogical stance that allows

people to learn and teach by drawing from their linguistic and semiotic resources, (4) a set of practices that are drawn from linguistic and semiotic resources of bilinguals, and being (5) transformational as it transforms the traditional notion of languages themselves and their practices along with the lives of bilinguals. (Mazak, 2017, pp. 5–6)

It is clear from the above assertion that translanguaging scholars acknowledge that translanguaging practices can be employed in multilingual classrooms as a pedagogical strategy, which Cenoz and Gorter (2017) referred to as *pedagogical translanguaging*. Such a strategy is planned by the teacher in order to encourage learners to maximise their linguistic repertoires. In addition, García and Wei (2014, p. 92) argued that employing translanguaging in the classroom is more than a pedagogical strategy but is rather a “transformative pedagogy” for language-minoritised learners that summons the bi-/multilingual subjectivities, thereby intentionally leveraging their language practices.

In the context of the above, García et al. (2017) provided four goals for translanguaging pedagogy. These include, firstly, supporting students as they engage with and comprehend complex content and texts; secondly, providing opportunities for students to develop linguistic practices for academic contexts; thirdly, making space for students’ bilingualism and ways of knowing and; finally, supporting students’ bilingual identities and socio-emotional development. Although these goals are not exhaustive, they provide a framework through which we can view the benefits of this strategy in bi-/multilingual contexts. However, it should be noted that translanguaging may not serve the same purpose in all contexts, as García (2017) postulated. On the one hand, it may serve the purpose of scaffolding learning in monolingual educational settings, while on the other hand, it can be used for minority language preservation (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). What is important is that it should address the needs of learners of the local community in which it is implemented by advancing social justice and providing language-minoritised learners with equal educational opportunities (Toker & Olğun-Baytaş, 2022). Translanguaging in this article therefore, refers to a pedagogical approach that intentionally employs and validates a variety of languages that learners bring to the classroom and views learners’ repertoires as single, integrated entities that include numerous modalities (Ritchie, 2023).

Methodology

This study is framed by an interpretivist research paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), which seeks to understand the viewpoints of the subject participants being observed. As Ugwu et al. (2021) asserted, for an interpretivist paradigm, reality is relative, knowledge is subjective. In addition, a qualitative research approach was employed because it facilitates the understanding of beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions (Pathak et al., 2013). In this study, the perspectives on transliterated terms in isiZulu of isiZulu L1 students enrolled in first-year modules at UKZN were solicited through focus group interviews. The participants (n = 28) were purposefully sampled using maximum variation sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024, p. 95). The sampling criteria allowed for targeting relevant participants, albeit, bringing their varied experiences. Two criteria were used: they had to be L1 speakers of isiZulu, and had to be enrolled in a first-year module at UKZN. The participants were recruited from eight disciplines across the four colleges of the university: Agriculture and Engineering Sciences, Health Sciences, Humanities, Law and Management Sciences. The participants were enrolled in the following disciplines: anatomy (n = 4), physiology (n = 2), law (n = 5), management (n = 2), physics (n = 6), chemistry (n = 2), architecture (n = 2), and community development (n = 5). Even though the sample participants were not a representative sample of the student fraternity, recruiting participants from different disciplines allows for balanced findings on the subject under investigation. Before the study began, ethical protocols were observed as

prescribed by the UKZN Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Each participant gave informed consent to participate, and anonymity of participants was upheld through the use of unique identifiers as code names. During focus groups interviews, the participants shared their perspectives on transliterated terms in isiZulu from the point of view of their respective academic disciplines. The interviews were recorded (with the consent of the participants), coded, transcribed, and the transcripts were verified by three independent research assistants. The data excerpts were numbered consecutively, and thereafter organised and analysed according to themes using NVivo 12 Pro software. The themes were generated focusing on the students' perspectives on the transformative and inclusive aspects that translanguaging may embed in the transliterated discipline-specific terminology in isiZulu.

Findings

Data generated in the focus group interviews are presented below in response to the two research questions underlying this investigation: "In what ways do isiZulu L1 students perceive the element of transformation in the transliterated terms in isiZulu?" and "To what extent do isiZulu transliterated terms in the discipline-specific terminology lists encompass inclusivity as perceived by isiZulu L1 students?"

The Transformation Element in the Transliterated Terms in isiZulu

The idea of the transformative role of translanguaging was affirmed by García and Wei (2014, p. 92) who stated that translanguaging in the classroom is more than just a pedagogical strategy but is rather a "transformative pedagogy" particularly for marginalised languages learners, which allows them to leverage their everyday language practices in order to access knowledge. In this regard, students articulated how they perceived the terms in isiZulu to be transformative. This transformative feature in transliteration is an enabler for isiZulu L1 students. Transliterated terms allow for epistemological access to the discipline content. When transliterated, terms presumably assist students to perform better than they would have if the terms were in "pure" isiZulu. Two participants asserted:

TT/P2: I think transliterated words are helpful because as much as we can use isiZulu but "hard core" Zulu is very challenging.

The participant admits to using isiZulu. However, the admission indicates a challenge in decoding pure isiZulu. To mitigate this challenge, the participant opts for transliterated terms as "helpful." In the same vein, the next participant added:

TT/P4: I agree with TT/P2 about transliterated words, if words are not transliterated they become difficult just as it would be difficult to find a term in isiZulu for "velocity."

The participant concurs on the level of difficulty of terms in pure isiZulu and, by extension, the difficulty in decoding discipline-specific content. Two perceptions are evident in the above assertions.

Firstly, the participants acknowledge that terms in pure isiZulu are inaccessible even for self-proclaimed isiZulu L1-speaking students. By using "hard core Zulu is very challenging" and "they become difficult," the participants indicate inaccessibility of academic content if terms in pure isiZulu are used. Secondly, participant TT/P4 acknowledges the possibility that some discipline-specific terms are not available in pure isiZulu and mentions the concept velocity, a physics term. If the terms are available, they may nevertheless be incomprehensible to the end-users, namely the students. Whether the terms are available in pure isiZulu or are incomprehensible, the participants reckon that transliteration is a viable

option. This aligns with Wei's (2024) argument that translanguaging moves a step further from multilingualism by challenging racio-linguistic and ethnic-linguistic ideologies that view bi-/multilingual learners as having separate languages and language behaviour. Instead, racial/ethnic identities and linguistic practices should be viewed together as part of the learner's translanguaging being and linguistic behaviour (Wei, 2024). The quandary on the unavailability and inaccessibility of pure terms in isiZulu is illustrated using the term "velocity," which is available in two terminology databases developed at UKZN. In the UKZN Term Bank, the term is displayed as in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Term "Velocity" in the UKZN Term Bank (<https://zululex.ukzn.ac.za/search?q=velocity>)

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the ZuluLex - Zulu Lexical Database search results for the term "velocity". The browser's address bar shows the URL zululex.ukzn.ac.za/search?q=velocity. The page features a dark red header with the ZuluLex logo and the text "ZuluLex - Zulu Lexical Database". Below the header, there is a search bar containing the word "velocity" and a dropdown menu set to "Physics". The search results are displayed in a white box with a dark border. On the left, under "Inexact matches:", there are three entries: "Mathematics", "instantaneous velocity", and "isivinini kuphazima". On the right, under "Current search: velocity | Results: 1", there is a list of search results, including "noma", "or", and various symbols like "<", ">", "=", and ">=".

In the Zulu Lexicon mobile application, it is displayed as in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Term “Velocity” in the Zulu Lexicon Mobile Application



The terms *isivinini* and *isivinikuphazamisa* are designated equivalents of the term “velocity” in the physics and mathematics disciplines, respectively. The term *isivinini* also appears in the information technology list as an equivalent of the terms “download speed” and “upload speed.” In this list, the equivalents are phrased as *isivinini sokulanda*/(1) *sokuthulula*/(2) *sokudawunlodwa*, and *isivinini sokulayisha*, respectively. Thus, *isivinini* may be used to refer either to velocity or to speed. This double meaning may not be welcome because students are rushed for time when studying. In the case where the pure terms are not comprehensible to isiZulu-speaking students (and, by extension, inhibit the discipline episteme), and in the case when the available terms are inaccessible, a transliterated term is a welcome choice.

Transliteration bridges the divide between English and isiZulu. The intermediary attribute in transliterated terms is transformative. The following participant attests to this transformative feature:

TT/AT4: Another challenge that could arise with these terms is that there are no isiZulu equivalents for the discipline-specific concepts in English. As a result, we could end up transliterating like saying *i-khaphi* for carpi.

The term “carpi” is vernacularised into isiZulu for ease of access to the discipline content and to recall the discipline concept. This vernacularisation is innovative and transformative. Carpi appears among other terms that have been developed in isiZulu for the anatomy discipline. From the terms listed in Figure 3, where the variants of carpi appear, the standardised equivalent for carpi is *sihlakala*. In the Zulu Lexicon mobile application, *sihlakala* appears in a singular form as “carpus” in the anatomy list. In the mobile application, the term has been vernacularised to fit the noun class system of the isiZulu language (*i-*

singular/*-sihlakala* wrist). The discipline episteme is not transposed in the term *isihlakala*, a wrist in English. In anatomy, *carpus/carpi* refers to a group of bones that form what, in layperson’s language, is referred to as a wrist. Participant TT/AT4 reckons that a transliterated term *ikhaphi* would be a welcome choice because there is no exact equivalent for *carpi* in isiZulu as illustrated in Figure 3, and *isihlakala* does not do justice to the discipline episteme. Such transliteration is transformative and innovative in that it allows for flexible translingual practices and complex transemiotic flows by design, and further prioritises the learners by incorporating their personal experiences, perspectives, and voices into classroom activities and learning (Wei, 2024).

Figure 3

The Term “Carpi” in the UKZN Term Bank

Anatomy	flexor carpi radialis
	isigobisisihlakala serediyasi
Anatomy	extensor carpi ulnaris
	iselulisihlakala ethanjeni lengalo elingaphakathi
Anatomy	extensor carpi radialis brevis
	iselulisihlakala esifushane ngokwerediyasi
Anatomy	extensor carpi radialis longus
	iselulisihlakala eside ngokwerediyasi
Anatomy	flexor carpi ulnaris
	isigobisisihlakala i-alna

The Inclusivity Aspect in the Transliterated Terms in isiZulu

Students regard the transliteration of discipline-specific terms in isiZulu as an indication of inclusivity in South African higher education. The aspect of inclusivity in transliterated terms may be understood as an accommodation strategy that allows for the varying competencies in isiZulu among students. This accommodation aspect of inclusivity is evident in the assertions below:

TT/PL1: I think transliterated terms are most welcome. If we were to use isiZulu “proper,” most people will be at a disadvantage—most people have lost touch of their home language already. This will make things difficult.

This participant acknowledges that not all isiZulu L1-speaking students have high competencies in isiZulu. With “most people will be at a disadvantage” and “lost touch of their home language,” the participant alludes to the different levels of competencies in isiZulu that may have resulted from the varied subject offering of isiZulu at school level. To concur on the varied subject offering of isiZulu, the next participant asserted:

TT/PL2: I also agree. Some people are not proficient in isiZulu. Some have learnt isiZulu as L1, some as an FAL, and some as an SAL. This then would make it difficult for most people to learn through isiZulu. However, if transliterated terms are used, everybody—no matter the level of proficiency in isiZulu—will be accommodated.

Participant TT/PL2 realistically reflects on the outcomes of the varied levels at which isiZulu may be offered at school level. This variation impacts on students' competency levels in the language. Thus, terms in pure isiZulu may alienate the very people who are meant to benefit from the terminology in isiZulu. Expressing similar sentiments, the next participant asserted:

TT/CD6: It is much better to use transliterated terms in order to accommodate everybody who uses the language from all backgrounds.

Participant TT/CD6 acknowledges that isiZulu-speaking students are not a homogenous group. The different subject offerings of isiZulu impact on the students' abilities to use the language for academic purposes.

The addition of transliterated terms in the terminology lists will allow for the use of isiZulu for academic purposes. Such use of isiZulu is inclusionary in nature. The participants below alluded to this inclusion:

TT/CD2: The use of transliterated terms will be a beacon of hope to those who have dropped out of the school system due to challenges with English. Such people will be encouraged to continue with education since terminology will be more accessible with transliterated terms.

The inclusion of isiZulu through transliteration of terms will have far-reaching effects according to Participant TT/CD2. Students who may have been alienated by the use of English may find the inclusion of isiZulu agreeable and encouraging. In this way, transliterated terms will ensure the use of isiZulu for academic purposes. The participant below said:

TT/A2: It will be of no use if "proper" words are used and nobody understands that concept. If this is done [inclusion of isiZulu], practicality should be considered on the choice/level of words to be used and transliterated terms have to be used.

Participant TT/A2 considers transliterated terms as practical. This may mean that such terms are more user-oriented in comparison to pure terms in isiZulu. The following participant concurred:

TT/M4: We use a lot of transliterated terms; one is only able to use isiZulu "proper" if one has done isiZulu at home language level at high school. But in everyday language use, we use a lot of transliterated terms and thus if isiZulu was to be used in academic contexts to assist isiZulu L1 students; transliterated terms would be welcomed.

For Participant TT/M4, transliterated terms emulate the lived experiences of isiZulu L1 students. When a language that students use on a day-to-day basis is featured in the academic space, these students may feel included and acknowledged. Such use of isiZulu is inclusionary within the ambit of decoloniality.

The excerpts from the data indicate the perceptions that isiZulu L1 students hold towards transliterated discipline-specific terms in isiZulu. The availability of the transliterated terms serves the cognitive and socio-political needs of African students. In the South African context, serving the cognitive needs of students through translanguaging is a legitimate response to the *Education White Paper 3* (DBE,

1997) that advocated the use of flexible models in teaching and learning. According to this study, the advocacy for flexible models in teaching and learning through transliterated terms in isiZulu serves three purposes:

- It responds to the needs of the emergent bilinguals (García-Mateus & Palmer, 2017) who are actualising their bilingual identities.
- It levels the academic playing field by disrupting institutionalised monolingualism (Wei, 2024).
- It addresses the systematic differing competencies of isiZulu L1 students, thus enabling access to scientific content (Infante & Licona, 2018).

In accordance with the goals of translanguaging as envisaged by García et al. (2017), the availability and use of transliterated terms in isiZulu afforded the participants in the current study the necessary academic support. Such support opens an opportunity for isiZulu L1 students to thrive in an English-dominated academic space. While this support disrupts monolingual practices, it empowers the students to gain recognition and to assert belonging as they navigate the academic space. In this academic trajectory, the transliterated terms in isiZulu are precise in accessing discipline epistemes. In the example presented in Figure 3, the term “carpi” has been terminologised using semantic loosening as *isihlakala*. While *isihlakala* may be acceptable in layperson’s terms, it does not transpose the discipline episteme as required in anatomy. Thus, *ikhaphi* is transformative and responds to the cognitive needs of isiZulu L1 students.

The transliterated terms in isiZulu are also inclusive—inclusive in the use of isiZulu for academic purposes and inclusive of all the differing levels of competencies in isiZulu. In the latter case, the transliterated terms address the socio-political needs of isiZulu L1 students. The systematic differences in offering isiZulu at L1, FAL, and SAL levels account for the heterogeneity in the competency levels in isiZulu. Wei (2024) argued that translanguaging practices demonstrate the representation and celebration of all identities and histories. The transliteration of terms is a realistic depiction of the socio-political evolution of the South African education system

Conclusion

This paper argued that translanguaging through transliteration in discipline-specific terminology is a transformative and inclusive practice. This practice responds to the cognitive needs of African students, and it addresses the differing competencies in African languages that are socio-politically oriented. In addition, transliteration indicates the lived fluidity in the linguistic repertoires of African students. We position transliteration of discipline-specific terms in isiZulu against the backdrop of the South African education system yet on the basis of a world-wide phenomenon of translanguaging in bi-/multilingual societies. Monolingual education practices disempower bi-/multilingual students, disregard these students’ identities, silence these students’ voices, and deprive these students of a sense of belonging in academic spaces. Transliteration, we argue, reverses these monolingual practices for every bi-/multilingual student in academia. Even though the participant sample for this study is not representative, the perceptions shared provide insights into the needs of bi-/multilingual students, the challenges that they encounter, and the expectations that they have. More studies on translanguaging through transliteration might offer further insights into this phenomenon, its applicability, its strengths, and its weaknesses.

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Reclaiming Academic Autonomy in South African Higher Education: Decolonial Multilingualism as Counter-Hegemonic Praxis against Neoliberal Market Forces

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Abstract

South African higher education is entrenched in neoliberal market forces that commodify knowledge, reinforce linguistic hierarchies, and perpetuate colonial epistemic dominance. Despite constitutional and policy commitments to multilingualism and decolonisation, English remains the dominant language in research and teaching, marginalising Indigenous African languages. The study examined the role of decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic strategy for reclaiming academic autonomy in South African higher education. Drawing on decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, linguistic justice, and translanguaging, the research employed a systematic literature review and qualitative document analysis. Institutional language policies from four public universities, national policy frameworks, and activist reports were analysed to examine the gap between commitments to multilingualism and everyday academic practice. Findings reveal that neoliberal funding models and global validation systems restrict the institutionalisation of Indigenous languages, reinforcing English hegemony. However, grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms have created spaces of resistance that advance epistemic justice and diversify knowledge production. These initiatives demonstrate how multilingual practices can disrupt colonial and neoliberal hierarchies while expanding academic inclusion and reclaiming academic autonomy in South African universities. The study contributes to debates on language justice, decolonisation, and higher education transformation by emphasising the need for systemic reforms that acknowledge the global utility of English and institutionalise African languages as equal academic mediums.

Keywords: academic autonomy, counter-hegemonic praxis, decolonial multilingualism, English hegemony, language justice, neoliberalism, South African higher education

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Introduction

South African higher education operates at the complex intersection of historical colonial legacies, ongoing neoliberal reforms, and contemporary struggles for linguistic and epistemic justice. Since the end of apartheid, universities in South Africa have been tasked with transforming their structures and curricula to reflect the country's rich linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as to redress the inequalities entrenched by decades of racial segregation and colonial domination (Jansen, 2017). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) contended that central to this transformation is the commitment to multilingualism and decolonisation, which are seen as critical to reclaiming academic autonomy and encouraging inclusive knowledge production that is responsive to the needs of historically marginalised communities. However, these aspirations are increasingly challenged by the pervasive influence of neoliberal market forces that commodify knowledge, enforce linguistic hierarchies, and reproduce colonial epistemic dominance within higher education institutions (Akala, 2021; Munyaradzi, 2024). Hence, there is a need to explore decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic tool for reclaiming academic autonomy in South African higher education.

The language question in South African higher education is deeply rooted in colonial and apartheid histories that systematically privileged English and Afrikaans while marginalising Indigenous African languages. Kamwangamalu (2016) argued that colonial language policies, beginning with British colonial rule, promoted Anglicisation as a political strategy to consolidate power, epitomised by the 1825 policy establishing English as the first official language and the 1907 Smuts Education Act, which mandated English instruction. That Act set the foundation for linguistic hierarchies that excluded African languages from formal education and intellectual discourse. During apartheid (1948–1994), language policies reinforced segregation and disenfranchisement, with Afrikaans and English dominating education and administration, while African languages were relegated to inferior status and limited to the homeland or "Bantu" education systems (Madiba, 2024). The apartheid regime's language policies functioned as instruments of control and oppression, limiting access to higher education for Black South Africans and suppressing Indigenous languages as academic languages.

Post 1994, democratic South Africa adopted a constitutional framework recognising 11 official languages, including nine Indigenous African languages, signalling a commitment to multilingualism and social inclusion. The Language Policy for Higher Education (Council on Higher Education, 2002) aimed to redress past imbalances by promoting the development of African languages as academic languages and fostering multilingualism in universities. However, this policy has been criticised for its vagueness, lack of implementation, and reliance on conditional clauses, such as "where reasonably practicable," which have limited its transformative impact (Nkomo, 2023). Simultaneously, neoliberal reforms have reshaped higher education governance, emphasising market-driven priorities such as global competitiveness, efficiency, and commodification of knowledge. According to Munyaradzi (2024), these reforms have reinforced English hegemony given that English-language outputs are privileged in international rankings and funding systems, thereby perpetuating colonial linguistic hierarchies under new economic forces.

Currently, South African higher education policy and practice continue to be shaped by the overlap of coloniality and neoliberalism. While official policies endorse multilingualism and the development of Indigenous languages, institutional practices prioritise English as the lingua franca of instruction, research, and administration (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). This dominance is reinforced by neoliberal imperatives that value English for its global market utility, marginalising African languages to symbolic or peripheral roles. Universities struggle to translate policy commitments into practice due to resource constraints, lack of institutional will, and deep-seated attitudes favouring English, resulting in what scholars describe as declarations without implementation (Nkomo, 2023). The persistence of English or Afrikaans dominance

reflects a continuity of colonial language ideologies sustained by neoliberal market logic that together, limit epistemic diversity and academic autonomy.

The marginalisation of Indigenous languages in higher education is not merely a linguistic issue but also an epistemological one. Language is deeply intertwined with knowledge production, identity, and power. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argued that the privileging of English as the language of academia reinforces a colonial epistemic order that devalues African languages and knowledge systems, effectively silencing alternative epistemologies and limiting the scope of academic inquiry. This epistemic violence perpetuates inequalities and hinders the development of a truly inclusive and socially just higher education system that reflects South Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity (Heugh, 2018). Consequently, this raises questions about academic autonomy, understood here as the capacity of scholars and institutions to pursue teaching, learning, and research independent of political, economic, and market pressures. In the current climate, such autonomy is curtailed not only by state agendas but also by global neoliberal pressures that incentivise conformity and discourage risk-taking in pedagogy and language policy.

Against this backdrop, decolonial multilingualism emerges as a counter-hegemonic praxis to centre African languages and epistemologies within academia for resisting linguistic imperialism and reclaiming educational sovereignty (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2021). Decolonial multilingualism involves not only the recognition of multiple languages within academic spaces but also the transformation of pedagogical practices, research methodologies, and institutional policies to centre Indigenous languages and epistemologies (Mbembe, 2016). Reclaiming academic autonomy through decolonial multilingualism necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of what constitutes knowledge, language, and academic excellence in South Africa. It calls for moving beyond tokenistic policy commitments toward substantive institutional transformation that values Indigenous languages and epistemologies as central to knowledge production and social justice (Heugh, 2018). This transformative agenda challenges the neoliberal commodification of knowledge and seeks to create a higher education system that is truly inclusive, diverse, and reflective of South Africa's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

This study investigates decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic strategy for reclaiming academic autonomy in South African higher education under neoliberal constraints. It critically examines institutional language policies, government frameworks, and grassroots interventions through the lenses of decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, and linguistic justice. The analysis clarifies how multilingualism functions as a decolonial intervention and identifies the challenges it encounters in academic contexts. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on decolonisation, language policy, and the transformation of higher education in postcolonial settings

Research Problem

The English dominance in South African higher education undermines efforts to promote equity, multilingualism, and epistemic justice. Despite constitutional recognition of 11 official languages and policy commitments to promote multilingualism, English remains the dominant language of teaching, research, and administration (Council on Higher Education, 2002). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), this linguistic hegemony entrenches colonial legacies, marginalises Indigenous African languages, and restricts the possibilities for diverse forms of knowledge production. The privileging of English, while often justified in the name of efficiency and global competitiveness, reproduces epistemic hierarchies that constrain academic autonomy and perpetuate exclusion (Mbembe, 2016).

Despite the challenges, English functions as the international language of business, higher education, science, and digital communication (Phillipson, 2018). It provides individuals with access to global academic networks, economic opportunities, and cultural exchange. In an era where artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models are reshaping knowledge production, the limited presence of South African Indigenous languages in digital platforms highlights the practical challenges of decolonising language use

(Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021). The ability to use English fluently thus remains vital for participating in the global knowledge economy and for leading meaningful, connected lives in the 21st century.

The study addresses how South African higher education can reconcile its multilingual and decolonial mandates with neoliberal pressures that sustain linguistic inequality. It also raises the question whether decolonial multilingualism can serve as a counter-hegemonic praxis that both affirms the necessity of English for global engagement and restores African languages as equal academic mediums.

Thus the research questions are:

How are multilingual language policies in South African higher education institutions implemented in practice, and to what extent do they challenge linguistic hierarchies?

How do neoliberal market forces constrain multilingualism and academic autonomy in South African universities?

In what ways do grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms serve as counter-hegemonic strategies to reclaim academic autonomy?

How can decolonial multilingualism be conceptualised as a form of counter-hegemonic praxis against the neoliberal commodification of knowledge?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing debates on decolonisation, language policy, and academic freedom in South African higher education. By examining the intersection of neoliberalism, multilingualism, and decoloniality, it highlights how policy commitments to linguistic diversity are often undermined by market-driven priorities and global validation systems. The analysis provides fresh insights into the contradictions between multilingual policies and institutional practices, offering a framework for reclaiming academic autonomy through decolonial multilingual praxis and epistemic plurality.

The findings have practical implications for policymakers, university leadership, and educators seeking to develop higher education settings that respect linguistic diversity and epistemic plurality. Furthermore, the study advances scholarly understanding of how decolonial multilingualism can serve as a counter-hegemonic strategy in postcolonial contexts, providing a model for other universities in the Global South that face similar challenges.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in a critical, decolonial epistemological perspectives that interrogate the entanglement of colonial legacies, neoliberal reforms, and contemporary struggles for linguistic justice in South African higher education. It draws on five interrelated theoretical traditions, which include decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, linguistic justice, translanguaging, and global Englishes to conceptualise decolonial multilingualism as both a counter-hegemonic praxis and a pragmatic response to global academic realities.

Decolonial Theory

Decolonial theory is a political, social, and epistemic project that challenges the enduring dominance of Western epistemologies and the coloniality of knowledge that persists in institutions of higher learning (Mignolo, 2011). According to Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2018), the theory critiques the colonial legacy that privileges Eurocentric ways of knowing, producing, and validating knowledge while marginalising and erasing Indigenous epistemologies, histories, and languages. Coloniality highlights how colonial power structures continue to shape knowledge production and cultural institutions long after formal political independence, necessitating the decolonial option, which is a deliberate epistemic shift that centres knowledge on the Global South (Mignolo, 2011).

Furthermore, Mbembe (2016) critiqued African universities for maintaining colonial epistemic frameworks and called for their transformation to reflect local histories and knowledge systems.

Decolonial theory thus positions language as central to the project of epistemic justice and academic transformation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) contended that language plays a central role in this colonial matrix because it is not merely a medium of communication but a carrier of worldviews and cognitive legitimacy. In this regard, decoloniality demands that African languages be repositioned not only as tools for access but as legitimate languages of knowledge production and critique. However, epistemic decolonisation remains an ongoing and contested struggle because it challenges deeply entrenched institutional structures and dominant paradigms without a singular blueprint for transformation (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016).

While decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2011) remains central in conceptualising coloniality of knowledge and the pluriversity of epistemologies, the framework also acknowledges critiques and alternative frameworks. Chibber (2013) cautioned against overextending decolonial theory's explanatory power without adequately accounting for materialist dimensions of global capitalism, while Gopal (2019) emphasised the need to foreground class, race, and intersectional concerns in discussions of epistemic justice. Engaging these perspectives enables a more comprehensive mapping of the field beyond uncontested decolonial voices, balancing epistemic critique with socio-political realities.

Critical Pedagogy and Humanising Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy intersects with decolonial theory by emphasising the position of education as a practice of freedom that challenges oppressive structures and empowers marginalised communities (Freire, 1970; Heleta, 2016). In the South African context, humanising pedagogy extends this by focusing on reclaiming colonised knowledge-making and cultivating learning environments that affirm the identities, languages, and experiences of historically excluded students (Heleta, 2016). However, tensions and paradoxes arise when decolonial pedagogical practices operate within neoliberal university structures that prioritise market-driven outcomes, efficiency, and global competitiveness over social justice and epistemic diversity. According to Maluleka (2024), this scenario creates a dilemma in which educators must navigate institutional demands while striving to enact transformative, decolonial teaching practices that resist the commodification of knowledge and affirm Indigenous epistemologies.

Language Justice and Multilingualism

Language justice theory foregrounds linguistic hierarchies as a form of epistemic violence that sustains inequalities in access to knowledge and participation in academic discourse (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Achieving linguistic justice involves disrupting colonial language hierarchies and ensuring that Indigenous languages are not only present but are valued as legitimate mediums for knowledge production and academic engagement. In South African higher education, the privileging of English and Afrikaans reproduces colonial linguistic dominance, marginalising Indigenous African languages and limiting epistemic diversity and social inclusion (Rakgogo, 2024). Madiba (2024) contended that multilingualism, when enacted through translanguaging pedagogies, offers a means to resist the neoliberal commodification of knowledge by validating multiple languages and knowledge systems within academic spaces. This approach challenges the monolingual norms of global academia and promotes epistemic justice by enabling students and scholars to draw on their full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning and knowledge production (Heugh, 2018).

Translanguaging Theory

Translanguaging theory provides both a theoretical and pedagogical lens. It recognises that multilingual speakers draw flexibly from their full linguistic repertoires rather than treating languages as separate, bounded systems (García & Wei, 2014). Madiba (2024) argued that in higher education, translanguaging affirms students' linguistic identities, deepens epistemic access, and resists monolingual norms tied to colonial and neoliberal logics. By viewing language as practice and resource, translanguaging

highlights the agency of multilingual students and educators in reclaiming linguistic sovereignty. Translanguaging is thus a critical site of epistemic sovereignty and social justice, empowering multilingual speakers in contexts where coloniality and neoliberalism marginalise Indigenous languages, making it a vital tool in decolonial praxis and linguistic justice in South African academia.

Global Englishes

The global Englishes framework complements decoloniality by situating English within global, postcolonial, and digital contexts (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Rather than treating English as a monolithic standard, this perspective recognises diverse, localised varieties shaped by sociocultural contexts. Scholars argue that while English enables access to international networks, academic visibility, and employability, it also entrenches hierarchies that marginalise other languages and epistemologies (Canagarajah, 2017; Phillipson, 2018). In South Africa, this duality underscores the tension between English's instrumental value and its role in perpetuating epistemic exclusion.

Counter-Hegemonic Praxis

The notion of counter-hegemonic praxis, rooted in Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, underpins the study's focus on resistance. Gramsci conceptualised hegemony as the subtle and pervasive dominance of ruling ideologies, which are naturalised through institutions, language, and cultural norms. Counter-hegemonic praxis, then, refers to deliberate actions that challenge and subvert dominant ideologies, whether colonial, neoliberal, or monolingual. In this study, counter-hegemonic praxis is understood as the deployment of decolonial multilingualism not only as a policy ideal but as a strategic and political intervention.

Conceptual Framing

The theoretical perspectives illuminate the contradictions of language policy and practice in South African higher education. Decolonial theory exposes colonial continuities, critical pedagogy foregrounds the emancipatory potential of education, linguistic justice highlights structural inequities, translanguaging demonstrates practical strategies for inclusion, and global Englishes situates English as both a resource and a hegemonic force. This integrative stance enables a comprehensive understanding of decolonial multilingualism as both counter-hegemonic praxis and pragmatic negotiation with global realities. It recognises the necessity of English for global participation while insisting on systemic reforms that elevate Indigenous African languages as co-equal carriers of epistemic authority.

Grassroots initiatives, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms illustrate how Indigenous languages are reclaimed as legitimate mediums of knowledge production. Importantly, student voices continue to shape these practices. While #FeesMustFall (2015–2017) was pivotal in linking access, decolonisation, and linguistic justice (Heleta, 2016), contemporary student concerns have shifted toward institutionalising translanguaging, ensuring epistemic access for non-native English speakers, and interrogating the digital exclusion of African languages from AI-driven systems (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). In sum, the framework integrates sociocultural theories of language, translanguaging, decoloniality, and critiques of global Englishes, while foregrounding the new digital terrain where linguistic hierarchies are reproduced. It recognises both the enabling and constraining roles of English, engages with critiques beyond decolonial voices, and situates contemporary student activism as central to linguistic justice. By extending the lens to include AI and digital language technologies, the framework highlights the urgency of ensuring that Indigenous African languages are not only valued in academia but also encoded into the infrastructures of the 21st-century knowledge economy. The study is positioned within current intellectual debates by extending decolonial voices (Mignolo, 2011) through engagement with critiques and dialogues (Chibber, 2013; Gopal, 2019), and by emphasising the evolving nature of multilingual activism, including more student voices that transcend earlier social movements like #FeesMustFall.

Literature Review

Neoliberalism's Impact on Higher Education in South Africa

Neoliberalism in higher education refers to the adoption of market-oriented principles and practices that emphasise competition, efficiency, accountability, and commodification of knowledge (Jansen, 2017). Neoliberalism has reshaped South African higher education by entrenching market-oriented logic and practices that prioritise competition, efficiency, and the commodification of knowledge. Steynberg et al. (2024) contended that this ideological shift has transformed universities into entities that must align their goals with global economic demands, often at the expense of social justice and inclusivity. The adoption of neoliberal reforms has introduced performance management systems, funding models tied to research outputs, and governance structures that emphasise accountability to market forces rather than public good (Hlatshwayo, 2022). These changes have led to what some scholars described as "modern academic slavery," where academic staff face exploitative labour conditions driven by intensified productivity demands and diminished academic freedom (Steynberg et al., 2024, p. 8).

According to Akala (2021), the neoliberal university in South Africa is also characterised by the commodification of education, where students are positioned as consumers and higher education is treated as a private good rather than a public service. This shift has exacerbated inequalities in access, as rising tuition fees and reduced state funding make higher education unaffordable for many historically marginalised groups. Student protests such as #FeesMustFall highlighted the tensions between neoliberal policies and demands for equitable access and transformation (Jansen, 2017). Furthermore, neoliberalism's emphasis on global rankings and English-language research outputs reinforces linguistic hierarchies and epistemic exclusion, privileging Western knowledge systems and marginalising Indigenous African epistemologies (Akala, 2021).

Despite policy frameworks that nominally support transformation and multilingualism, neoliberal imperatives undermine these goals by privileging market-driven skills and English as the dominant academic language. The deep-rooted presence of neoliberalism in governance and funding structures restricts universities' ability to implement major decolonial changes and scholarship in Indigenous languages. Thus, South African higher education remains caught in a paradox where the rhetoric of transformation coexists with neoliberal practices that perpetuate colonial and capitalist inequalities.

Language Policy and Multilingualism in South African Higher Education

South Africa's post-apartheid language policies officially endorse multilingualism and the inclusion of Indigenous African languages in higher education, reflecting constitutional commitments to linguistic diversity and social justice (Council on Higher Education, 2001). Universities have developed language policies that recognise languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho alongside English and Afrikaans (Cele, 2021). However, the implementation of these policies is uneven and constrained by institutional inertia, limited resources, and the dominance of English in teaching, learning, and research.

Ntombela (2024) and Heleta (2016) posited that the global hegemony of English, closely linked to neoliberal globalisation, has resulted in English becoming the lingua franca of academia, marginalising Indigenous languages and epistemologies. This linguistic dominance is reinforced by funding models and academic validation systems that prioritise English-language publications and international rankings, creating disincentives for Indigenous language scholarship. Consequently, Indigenous languages are often relegated to a symbolic status in policy documents, lacking substantive institutional support and integration into mainstream academic practices (Council on Higher Education, 2025).

Decoloniality challenges these entrenched linguistic hierarchies by advocating for epistemic justice and the recognition of Indigenous languages and knowledge systems (Heleta, 2016; Mignolo, 2011). According to Madiba (2024), decolonial multilingualism emphasises the importance of integrating multiple languages in academic spaces through pedagogical approaches such as translanguaging, which allow fluid

movement between languages to enhance learning and knowledge production. Translanguaging presents promising avenues for challenging linguistic hierarchies by enabling students and educators to use multiple languages fluidly in the teaching and learning process. Nonetheless, these initiatives face major challenges in scaling up within neoliberalised higher education systems that prioritise market-driven outputs and English-language dominance.

Conceptualising Academic Autonomy and Decolonial Multilingualism

Academic autonomy refers to the capacity of higher education institutions to govern themselves independently in relation to their core academic functions, such as curriculum design, research agendas, and admission policies, without undue external interference (University of the Free State, 2023). It encompasses institutional self-governance exercised through leadership structures, such as councils and senates, which are responsible for upholding academic standards and institutional values. Academic autonomy is closely linked to academic freedom, which protects the rights of academics and students to pursue knowledge, engage in critical inquiry, and express ideas without fear of censorship and reprisal (Adewumi & Duma, 2024). In South Africa, autonomy is understood as "substantive autonomy," meaning that universities should serve public and social purposes while safeguarding scholarship and academic freedom rather than being subordinated to political and market-driven goals. However, this autonomy is conditional and not absolute, recognising the legitimate role of the state in steering the higher education system through procedural controls while respecting institutional independence in intellectual matters. Decolonial multilingualism is a transformative approach that challenges the dominance of colonial languages and epistemologies in higher education by promoting the use of Indigenous African languages alongside others. According to Madiba (2024), decolonial multilingualism involves not only policy commitments to linguistic diversity but also pedagogical practices such as translanguaging that enable the fluid use of multiple languages to encourage inclusive learning environments and epistemic justice. It functions as a counter-hegemonic praxis that resists neoliberal commodification of knowledge by affirming the epistemic value of Indigenous languages and challenging linguistic hierarchies entrenched by colonial and neoliberal forces (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021).

Gaps in Empirical Research

While a growing body of literature exists on language policy, neoliberalism, and decoloniality in South African higher education, empirical research linking these areas remains limited. Few studies have systematically examined how neoliberal funding models and global academic validation systems constrain the implementation of multilingual policies and decolonial interventions. Moreover, the role of grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing as practical counter-hegemonic strategies has not been sufficiently documented and analysed in relation to institutional policy and practice. This gap limits understanding of how academic autonomy can be reclaimed through decolonial multilingual praxis within the neoliberal university context.

Furthermore, there is a need for more empirical investigation into the institutional factors that facilitate or hinder the establishment of language units and centres, which are critical for supporting the implementation of language policies. The disconnect between policy commitments and classroom realities, as well as the experiences and perspectives of students and academics navigating these linguistic landscapes, also requires deeper qualitative and quantitative exploration (Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022). Addressing these gaps would provide valuable insights into how South African universities can move beyond symbolic multilingualism towards substantive linguistic and epistemic transformation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design combining document analysis and a systematic literature review that examined the intersection of neoliberalism, multilingualism, and decoloniality in South African higher education. The systematic literature review complemented the document analysis by synthesising existing scholarly research to contextualise findings and identify gaps. Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive analysis of institutional language policies, government frameworks, activist interventions, and academic debates relevant to decolonial multilingual praxis under neoliberal constraints.

Data Collection

A purposive sample of 30 documents was analysed, comprising institutional language policies from public universities, national policy frameworks, and reports from activist organisations. The selection included universities with explicit language policies reflecting different linguistic contexts, such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Pretoria, University of KwaZulu-Natal, and University of the Free State. Documents were sourced from official university websites, government portals, academic databases, and activist platforms to ensure a broad and representative sample. The timeframe focused on documents produced between 2000 and 2024, allowing the study to trace continuities and shifts in policy discourse from early post-apartheid reforms to more recent neoliberal and digital transformations.

The decision to concentrate on public institutions was based on major differences between public and private universities in South Africa, principally regarding access to policies, language use, and social mandates. In addition, public universities were prioritised because they operate under stronger government mandates regarding multilingualism and decolonisation, making them central to the study.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. A coding framework was developed using deductive categories drawn from the theoretical framework. The analysis identified recurring patterns around policy–practice gaps, the dual role of English, neoliberal constraints, and emerging counter-hegemonic practices such as translanguaging and Indigenous language scholarship.

Ethics Consideration

The study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and did not involve human participants. According to institutional guidelines, this type of research is exempt from formal ethical review. Nevertheless, all sources were handled with integrity, accuracy, and respect for scholarly standards.

Limitations

The study relied on publicly available documents, which may not fully capture internal institutional dynamics and unpublished grassroots efforts, potentially introducing selection bias (Bowen, 2009). It also focused on public universities, excluding private institutions, which could have different language policies and neoliberal pressures, limiting generalisability. Additionally, document analysis inherently interprets texts created by various actors with potential biases and agendas. However, reflexivity and triangulation were employed to increase trustworthiness.

Results

Policy–Practice Disconnects

Despite South Africa's progressive multilingual language policies, as enshrined in the Constitution and the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Arts and Culture, 2003), a major gap persists between policy and practice within higher education institutions. Numerous studies highlight that while multilingualism is formally mandated, its implementation is weak and inconsistent, resulting in the continued dominance of English in academic teaching, research, and administration (Kaschula, 2013).

A key finding across multiple investigations is that institutional language policies exist more as symbolic commitments than as drivers of substantive linguistic transformation. University of the Free State and University of KwaZulu-Natal have multilingual policies that recognise Indigenous African languages alongside English and Afrikaans. Nonetheless, English remains the predominant language of research output and instruction (Cele, 2021). This disconnect is attributed to several factors including limited resources, a lack of academic materials in Indigenous languages, insufficient staffing, and inadequate institutional support structures.

Moreover, sociolinguistic research indicates that students and parents sometimes perceive Indigenous languages as less important or less useful in academic and professional contexts, which further undermines efforts to implement multilingual education (Kaschula, 2013). The low number of graduates majoring in African languages, especially at postgraduate levels, reflects this trend and signals a broader challenge in shifting attitudes and institutional cultures (Kaschula, 2013).

Recent scoping reviews confirm that while some universities, such as University of KwaZulu-Natal, have made strides in integrating Indigenous languages into teaching and administrative practices, many others struggle with effective implementation (Zondo et al., 2025). However, dominance of English is sustained by global academic publishing standards and funding systems that favour English-language research, leading to structural obstacles in promoting Indigenous languages in academia. Furthermore, accountability mechanisms for policy implementation remain weak. While universities are required to submit institutional language policies aligned with the national framework, this often results in compliance rather than genuine commitment (Nkomo, 2023). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is mandated to develop funding mechanisms to support multilingualism, however, progress has been slow, further hindering implementation and preserving the dominant position of English in research outputs and academic discourses (Nkomo, 2023).

Neoliberal Constraints

The neoliberal framework governing South African higher education has entrenched English as the dominant language of teaching, learning, and research, largely due to funding models and global academic validation systems that prioritise English-language outputs. Ntombela (2024) argued that despite policy commitments to multilingualism and the promotion of Indigenous languages, universities continue to operate within a neoliberal logic that equates academic success with English proficiency and international visibility. This dynamic creates structural barriers for Indigenous language scholarship because funding agencies and institutional subsidies are often tied to research published in internationally recognised **English-language journals.**

The Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020) explicitly promoted multilingualism. However, it elevates English as the de facto medium of instruction and research, as part of the broader global Englishes phenomenon reflecting neoliberal market demands and global academic norms. This contradiction results in a policy crisis where Indigenous languages are marginalised in practice, limiting epistemic access for students whose first language is not English and perpetuating linguistic hierarchies rooted in coloniality (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009). The neoliberal emphasis on efficiency, competitiveness, and global rankings further entrenches English hegemony, as universities prioritise outputs that enhance their international standing over local linguistic and epistemic inclusion (Munyaradzi, 2024). This neoliberal linguistic commodification sustains epistemic injustices by limiting the production and dissemination of scholarship in African languages, thereby excluding large segments of the student population from meaningful participation in academic life.

Emerging Resistance

Grassroots Activism

In response to these neoliberal constraints, various forms of resistance have emerged within South African higher education, demonstrating partial successes in reclaiming linguistic and epistemic autonomy. Grassroots activism, notably student-led movements such as #FeesMustFall, has foregrounded language as a critical site of struggle, demanding the inclusion of Indigenous African languages in curricula and institutional practices (Heleta, 2016). These movements challenge the neoliberal and colonial status quo by advocating for epistemic justice and linguistic diversity as integral to decolonial transformation. Activists and communities engage in a continuous process of agency to assert the political and educational legitimacy of Indigenous languages, thereby subverting the hierarchical colonial relations embedded in conventional schooling and paving the way for plural epistemologies (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). This process enables Indigenous learners to connect scientific and academic concepts with their lived socio-ecological contexts, fostering deeper epistemological access and relevance.

Translanguaging Pedagogies

Pedagogically, translanguaging approaches have gained traction as a means to disrupt English monolingualism, and support multilingual learners by allowing the fluid use of multiple languages in teaching and learning (Madiba, 2024). University of KwaZulu-Natal has initiated isiZulu-medium courses that empower students to learn and express complex disciplinary knowledge in their home language, encouraging epistemic inclusion and identity affirmation (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). Similarly, University of Pretoria introduced a multilingual language policy to transition from an Afrikaans-English bilingual model to a greater inclusion of African languages. However, progress has been cautious and often met with institutional resistance, particularly from stakeholders defending the status of Afrikaans (du Plessis, 2021). At UCT, translanguaging has been piloted as a transformative pedagogic strategy that disrupts colonial language hierarchies by legitimising the use of isiXhosa alongside English in classrooms (Madiba, 2024). Recent developments, such as the revised language policy, reflect a growing commitment to linguistic diversity. UCT (2024) now recognises English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa as official languages and has identified South African Sign Language, Khoekhoegowab, N|uu, and Afrikaaps for future development, aligning with national directives and funding initiatives to support multilingualism. Somtala (2022) argued that while these universities have introduced remarkable policies and programmes, implementation remains uneven and susceptible to institutional inertia, lack of funding, and the pressure to conform to global academic standards.

Alternative Publishing Platforms

Alternative publishing platforms also serve as sites of resistance, providing spaces for Indigenous language scholarship that operate outside the constraints of global English-language academic publishing. Journals like *Imbizo* and open-access repositories promote research in African languages, supporting epistemic pluralism and challenging the neoliberal commodification of knowledge (Ntombela, 2024). These platforms permit scholars to disseminate knowledge that is culturally relevant and linguistically accessible, contributing to the broader project of decolonial multilingualism. However, resistance faces challenges, emanating from limited institutional support, scarce funding, and the pervasive influence of neoliberal metrics that prioritise English-language outputs (Heleta, 2016). While grassroots activism and innovative pedagogies disrupt dominant paradigms, systemic change requires sustained commitment from universities, policymakers, and funding bodies to decentre English and institutionalise multilingualism as a core academic value.

Discussion

Neoliberalism and Restriction of Academic Autonomy

The findings confirm that neoliberal forces commodify knowledge in South African higher education by prioritising market-driven metrics, global rankings, and English-language scholarship, which collectively restrict academic autonomy. They reveal the persistent entanglement of South African higher education with neoliberal and colonial epistemic orders that constrain genuine transformation. Decolonial theory emphasises the need to expose and dismantle the coloniality of knowledge, which is an enduring structure that privileges Western epistemologies and marginalises Indigenous African ways of knowing and being (Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2011). The evidence of policy–practice disconnects, neoliberal funding constraints, and English-language dominance in this study illustrate how coloniality continues to shape institutional autonomy and academic freedom under the guise of neoliberalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The neoliberal commodification of knowledge, as shown in the findings, restricts academic autonomy by subordinating universities to market logics that prioritise global rankings, English-language outputs, and economic efficiency (Jansen, 2017). This aligns with critiques that institutional autonomy in South African universities is co-opted to preserve Western knowledge economies and suppress Indigenous epistemologies, thus perpetuating epistemic injustice (Nkomo, 2023). Decoloniality exposes how institutional autonomy, rather than enabling emancipation, can become a mechanism for maintaining colonial power structures when it is disconnected from public accountability and local realities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Rakgogo, 2024).

Structural and Cultural Barriers

The study also highlights the interaction between structural and cultural barriers. Structurally, neoliberal funding models and global validation systems prioritise English, leaving limited resources for African language development. Culturally, entrenched perceptions among students, parents, and academics frame Indigenous languages as less valuable for professional success (Kaschula, 2013). These perceptions undermine implementation even when policies exist. Without challenging both the economic structures and the cultural attitudes that sustain English dominance, transformation will remain elusive.

Decolonial Multilingualism as Counter-Hegemonic Praxis

In contrast, decolonial multilingualism emerges as an important counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges neoliberal and colonial epistemic orders by reclaiming Indigenous languages and knowledge systems within academic spaces (Heugh, 2018; Madiba, 2024). Drawing on decolonial theory, this praxis disrupts the monolingual and monocentric dominance of English by promoting multilingual pedagogies such as translanguaging, which enable students and academics to navigate and integrate multiple linguistic repertoires (Madiba, 2024). Translanguaging acts as a form of linguistic and epistemic resistance, promoting inclusivity and cognitive engagement while contesting the coloniality of language and knowledge (Madiba, 2024). Furthermore, grassroots activism and alternative publishing platforms amplify Indigenous languages and epistemologies, creating spaces that circumvent neoliberal academic validation systems and promote epistemic justice.

Several institutions and movements in South Africa have begun experimenting with forms of decolonial multilingualism, with varying levels of depth and commitment. The findings highlight the potential of decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges these neoliberal and colonial constraints. Through translanguaging pedagogies, grassroots activism, and alternative publishing platforms, universities can begin to reclaim academic spaces as sites of epistemic justice and social inclusion (Madiba, 2024). The praxis resonates with critical and humanising pedagogies that seek to disrupt dominant knowledge hierarchies and affirm marginalised identities and knowledge (Freire, 1970; Heleta, 2016). However, neoliberal pressures have remained partially contested, requiring sustained institutional commitment and structural change (Madiba, 2024). Consequently, the praxis is not without tensions given

that it operates within institutions still constrained by neoliberal policies and global academic norms, requiring ongoing negotiation and resistance.

Decolonial Multilingualism and the Dual Role of English

The findings highlight the potential of decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges neoliberal and colonial constraints by advocating for Indigenous languages and epistemologies. Translanguaging pedagogies, grassroots activism, and alternative publishing platforms enable students and scholars to contest English hegemony while affirming their linguistic identities and knowledge systems (Madiba, 2024). These practices disrupt the commodification of knowledge and open new pathways for epistemic justice and inclusion.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the dual role of English within this matrix. As the lingua franca of global academia, science, and digital communication, English remains an indispensable resource for South African scholars seeking participation in global knowledge economies (Canagarajah, 2017; Phillipson, 2018). Its role as a bridge to international collaboration, academic visibility, and access to digital infrastructures cannot be ignored. Thus, the challenge is not to reject English but to reposition it within a more pluralistic linguistic order that balances global participation with local epistemic sovereignty. Universities must therefore institutionalise multilingual pedagogies that leverage the advantages of English while dismantling its exclusivity.

Toward a Decolonial Academic Ecosystem

Building a decolonial academic ecosystem involves institutional transformation that goes beyond superficial policy changes to embed decolonial values in research, teaching, and community engagement. Community-engaged scholarship exemplifies this transformation by fostering reciprocal relationships between universities and local communities, ensuring that knowledge production addresses real-world challenges and reflects Indigenous knowledge systems. Transdisciplinary research further supports epistemic liberation by breaking down disciplinary silos and integrating diverse epistemologies, methodologies, and languages in collaborative knowledge creation (Heleta, 2016).

Policy reforms are essential to sustain and scale these initiatives. Increased funding dedicated to Indigenous language research and development is crucial for overcoming the resource constraints that limit the growth of multilingual academic programmes (Munyaradzi, 2024). Additionally, decolonial accreditation criteria should be established to recognise and reward scholarship that advances epistemic diversity and linguistic justice, challenging the dominance of English-language metrics and Western validation systems (Emsley & Modiba, 2024). Such systemic changes would enhance academic autonomy by freeing institutions from the constraints of neoliberal market logic, enabling them to serve as sites of epistemic sovereignty and social transformation.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

The findings call for a reorientation of higher education policy and practice to genuinely support decolonial multilingualism as a means of reclaiming academic autonomy. Policymakers must move beyond symbolic multilingual policies to provide concrete funding, infrastructure, and institutional support for Indigenous language scholarship, teaching, and publishing. This includes revising funding models to incentivise research in African languages and recognising alternative scholarly outputs that reflect local epistemologies. Higher education should adopt translanguaging and other inclusive pedagogies that validate students' linguistic identities and promote critical engagement with knowledge production (Madiba, 2024). Universities need to institutionalise language units and support grassroots initiatives that resist neoliberal commodification and promote epistemic diversity.

Implications for Academic Autonomy and Decolonial Transformation

The findings underscore that academic autonomy must be reconceptualised beyond neoliberal and colonial frameworks that equate autonomy with freedom from state control and market imperatives.

Instead, autonomy should be understood as relational and accountable to the social, cultural, and epistemic needs of historically marginalised communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This means universities must balance institutional independence with a commitment to public accountability and epistemic justice, ensuring that autonomy serves transformation rather than preserving coloniality (Rakgogo, 2024). Additionally, decolonial transformation requires embedding multilingualism as a core principle of academic practice—not merely as policy rhetoric. This entails investing in language units, developing Indigenous language scholarship, and adopting pedagogies that support linguistic diversity and epistemic plurality (DHET, 2020; Heugh, 2018). Translanguaging and other inclusive pedagogies should be institutionalised to foster epistemic access and challenge English-language hegemony (Madiba, 2024). Furthermore, alternative publishing models must be supported to legitimise Indigenous knowledge production outside neoliberal academic validation systems.

The findings call for a systemic shift in funding and governance structures that currently reinforce neoliberal market logic. Policymakers and university leaders should develop funding models that incentivise multilingual scholarship and community-engaged research aligned with local epistemologies and social justice goals (Nkomo, 2023). This would help dismantle the structural barriers to decolonial transformation and enable universities to reclaim their role as sites of emancipatory knowledge production. Realising this potential requires reimagining academic autonomy as accountable and transformative, institutionalising multilingual pedagogies, and restructuring funding and governance to support decolonial aims.

Conclusion

The study examined the intersection of neoliberalism, linguistic hierarchies, and academic autonomy in South African higher education. It highlighted a persistent policy–practice disconnect where progressive multilingual policies remain largely unimplemented in practice, with English continuing to dominate academic research and teaching. The study foregrounds decolonial multilingualism as a counter-hegemonic praxis that challenges these neoliberal and colonial constraints. Through grassroots activism, translanguaging pedagogies, and alternative publishing platforms, Indigenous languages and knowledge systems are being reclaimed and revitalised as legitimate academic resources. This praxis disrupts not only linguistic hierarchies but also promotes epistemic justice and social inclusion, resonating with decolonial theory's call for epistemic freedom.

The study advances the conversation on decolonising South African higher education by demonstrating that reclaiming academic autonomy and fostering epistemic justice require sustained, systemic change that integrates multilingualism as a core dimension of decolonial praxis. Additionally, academic autonomy should be reconceptualised as relational and accountable, serving not only institutional independence but also the epistemic and social needs of historically marginalised communities. Such transformation is essential for creating universities that genuinely reflect and serve South Africa's linguistic, cultural, and intellectual diversity.

However, transformation requires a balanced recognition of the dual role English plays in higher education. While it perpetuates colonial hierarchies and neoliberal commodification, it also serves as an instrument for global access to academic networks, research visibility, and participation in the digital knowledge economy. The task is therefore not to eradicate English but to decentre its hegemony by embedding it within a multilingual academic ecosystem that values Indigenous languages as equal mediums of knowledge. Consequently, this means universities must simultaneously harness English strategically for global engagement while ensuring that African languages are institutionalised as legitimate academic languages. Only through such a dual strategy, can South African higher education reclaim academic autonomy, foster epistemic justice, and build universities that reflect both global participation and local epistemic sovereignty.

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Leveraging Multilingual Interventions at a South African University: A Decolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This conceptual paper critically explores how multilingual practices are being leveraged at a South African university as both a transformative and decolonial project. Using a decolonial theory as its analytical lens, the article interrogates the epistemic, linguistic, and pedagogical interventions aimed at dismantling the dominance of English in a higher education institution. The paper argues that multilingualism, when approached not as an add-on but as an epistemic right, opens up spaces for African languages and ways of knowing to thrive in academia. Drawing from recent institutional interventions such as translanguaging tutorials, academic staff training on multilingual pedagogies, and multilingual writing support for postgraduate students, the article offers an analysis of how these practices reimagine language policy beyond tokenistic inclusion. However, the implementation of multilingualism is not without its contradictions and challenges including limited resources, linguistic hierarchies, and epistemic resistance from both staff and students. Methodologically, the paper employs critical analysis of emerging themes on multilingualism, inclusive multilingualism practices, and translanguaging. The article concludes by arguing that multilingualism must be central, not peripheral in higher education and it recommends systemic shifts in pedagogy, policy, and institutional culture to realise its full transformative potential.

Keywords: multilingualism, multilingual practices, decolonial theory, multilingual writing support, translanguaging tutorials, multilingual pedagogies, higher education

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Introduction

In South Africa, the question of language of instruction, specifically in higher education, remains deeply entangled with the colonial legacies of apartheid that entrenched the English (and Afrikaans) hegemony as languages of instruction. The domination of English as medium of instruction persistently marginalises African Indigenous languages and undermines their development and intellectualisation as academic languages and languages of instruction (Banda & Simungala, 2023). Banda and Simungala also referred to this exclusion of African Indigenous languages in the academic spaces as *linguistic injustice*. Meanwhile, language policies such as the Language Policy Framework for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education, 2020) have advocated for the promotion of multilingualism to enable access, inclusivity, equity, as well social justice, however, such multilingualism is often overshadowed by slow implementation, fragmented strategies, and approaches that often have minimal strategic outcomes and impact on the access and success of students, and which are also often superficial (Prah, 2017). The purpose of this conceptual paper is to critically examine how three multilingual interventions—translanguaging tutorials, staff training on multilingual pedagogies, and academic writing for multilingual postgraduate students—can be leveraged at a South African university. Underpinned by a decolonial theory, this paper seeks to explore how these multilingualism interventions disrupt colonial legacies and linguistic hierarchy, validate African languages as carriers of knowledge, and promote inclusive practices (Madiba, 2024). This paper hopes to contribute to the debates that provide insights into how universities can practically leverage decolonial and transformative multilingual practices. It asks the research question: “How do the interventions leverage multilingualism at a South African university, and what are the contextual opportunities and challenges?”

Decolonial Framework

Decolonial theory (Ramon, 2007) provided a critical lens for understanding legacies of coloniality in university language practices. Decoloniality is generally perceived as an “activity that makes visible the invisible, unmuting the muted. It is an attempt to find new ways to combat the effects of Western imperialism” (Mignolo & Walsh 2018, p. 1). The term decoloniality is also used as an epistemological frame that requires delinking from the colonial mentality that projects monolingualism as the norm. According to Ramon (2007, p. 212), delinking is a process that “leads to decolonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding.” In South Africa, specifically, the consistent privileging of a colonial language, English, as medium of instruction in South African universities suggests that knowledge is only legitimate when it is expressed and produced in English. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) argued that this English hegemony was systematically crafted to delegitimise African languages and, to a greater extent, African epistemologies. Multilingual practices underpinned by a decolonial perspective must go beyond enabling communication or access; they must strive to disrupt the colonial order of knowledge (Makoni & Pennycook, 2012). Decolonial theory stresses the integration of multilingual practices in teaching and learning spaces to affirm knowledge pluriversality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It leverages African Indigenous languages as legitimate tools of thought, epistemology, and knowledge contribution. In this paper, a decolonial theory is adopted not only to critique the linguistic status of African languages within the multilingual practices, but to allow for the critical interrogation of the ways in which the multilingual interventions challenge the colonial power structures within the university. Unlike neutral language planning theories, the decolonial theory pays attention to linguistic power, domination, and emancipation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). In fact, it helps to expose how linguistic hierarchies perpetuate epistemic injustices, and it therefore provides a critical lens for reimagining more equitable multilingual practices. By drawing on a decolonial perspective, this paper does not only describe translanguaging tutorials, staff training on multilingual pedagogies, and academic writing for multilingual postgraduate students, but it positions these practices as tools for decolonisation and transformation in a South African university.

Conceptualising Multilingualism

In South African higher education, the relationship between language, knowledge, and power has been broadly documented with scholars constantly observing the dominance of English (and Afrikaans) as languages of instruction while the African Indigenous languages are excluded as carriers of knowledge in the academic spaces (Banda & Simungala, 2023; Madiba, 2014). Meanwhile, there has been a growing body of literature that positions multilingualism as an indispensable tool for the creation of inclusive, democratic, and socially just South African higher education environments (Makalela, 2015). Traditionally, multilingualism is perceived as a collection of two or more languages controlled by individuals, groups, institutions, or nations (Makoni & Pennycook, 2012). This quantitative view of multilingualism as separate language entities controlled by an individual has been criticised by scholars such as Makalela (2015). These scholars argued that the view of multilingualism as autonomous language codes is simply a pluralisation of monolingualism. In fact, Spotti and Blommaert (2017) joined Makoni and Pennycook (2012) in asserting that the traditional view of multilingualism as language entities undermines the complex linguistic acts and interactions in multilingual settings. This traditional view of multilingualism blocks any paradigm shifts in thinking about languages beyond the alternative use of languages, or switching or mixing of codes possessed by an individual.

Empirical Evidence on Interventions

In a study that interrogated the role of English in multilingual societies, Mohanty (2017) used India as a case to demonstrate that English empowers a few while the masses are disempowered. This situation is responsible for what Mohanty (2017) called the *double divide* in multilingual societies where Indigenous vernacular languages are divided from major state languages that are in turn, divided from dominant languages. Indigenous languages, which are spoken by the majority, are at the bottom of the ladder followed by major state languages, and dominant languages spoken by the minority are at the top of the ladder. In a study conducted in the South African context, Ntombela and Mpherwane (2024) examined the tapestry of languages in the education of an African student. They utilised autoethnography through which they traced and narrated the utility of multiple languages in higher education. They found resistance to utilising African languages, which they explained as emanating from monolingual fallacy. The monolingual fallacy favours the dominance of English language, which immediately pushes other languages into the periphery. Similarly, Madiba (2024) conducted a study where they traced the reading motivations of a cohort of multilingual university students. They found that students' motivation is enhanced when texts recognise their linguistic background, to which they argued that mixing languages in texts would be likely to keep motivation levels high. When this is linked with Ntombela and Mpherwane's (2024) study, it shows that a monolingual approach that does not acknowledge multiple languages deprives students of the motivation to learn. Again drawing from multilingualism as a strategy, Sebola's (2024) study forwarded an argument on resituating African languages and Indigenous knowledge systems. His main submission was that multilingualism is a tenable intervention towards the promotion of African languages in academia. His research agreed with Ngema-Msomi's (2024) study, which advocated for multilingualism as a tool for research and the production of knowledge. Ngema-Msomi's research was contextualised in agricultural extension where research analysis was provided in isiZulu, and which revealed that the incorporation of isiZulu enhanced the understanding of agricultural extension and improved the education of smallholder farmers.

The above-mentioned studies show that in multilingual classrooms where students are engage with concepts in multiple languages, there is a potential for deeper conceptual understanding and greater confidence and motivation for academic tasks.

Methodology

This article employs a critical conceptual approach rooted in decolonial inquiry. It draws on critical reflective praxis to engage with existing institutional multilingual interventions at a South African university. The aim is to interrogate how multilingualism is being framed, implemented, and resisted within the context of higher education transformation. This methodology does not seek to quantify or universalise but rather, to critically reflect on lived practices, contextual complexities, and ideological tensions within the university space. Data for the paper were derived from the selected quarterly reports

submitted between 2023 and 2025 on translanguaging tutorials, staff training on multilingual pedagogies, and writing support for multilingual postgraduate students. During that period, 12 translanguaging tutor training courses were facilitated across the three campuses of the university, together with four academic staff workshops on multilingual pedagogies, and six workshops on academic writing for multilingual postgraduate students. The author's own positionality is that of a researcher-coordinator of the multilingual initiatives; she co-facilitated the workshops on academic writing of multilingual students. The analysis follows a thematic interpretive approach, drawing out patterns related to ideological framing, pedagogical innovation, opportunities, and challenges. The following themes emerged: 1) opportunities of university multilingual interventions, 2) challenges of implementing multilingual interventions, and 3) suggestions for effective implementation of multilingual interventions. These thematic analyses allow for a nuanced understanding of the intersections between language, power, and transformation, offering insights into the potential and limitations of multilingualism as a decolonial tool in South African higher education (Cohen et al., 2017).

Multilingualism Interventions at a South African University

For three years now, one South African university has been continuously implementing a range of interventions in the academic spaces aimed at operationalising multilingualism as part of its language policy (University of the Free State, 2023) transformation agenda. These efforts seek not only to improve access and success for students, but also to contribute to the broader project of implementing and promoting multilingualism in the university teaching and learning, and fostering inclusivity and social justice. The following sections outline the key interventions that reflect this commitment.

Decolonial Translanguaging Tutorials

Since 2023, the university has been implementing translanguaging tutorials in selected faculties as one strategy to implement and promote multilingualism in the academic spaces, and to overcome linguistic barriers that undermine students' access and success. Translanguaging is a term that describes how bilingual and multilingual individuals communicate, allowing them to seamlessly switch between and utilise their different languages (Madiba, 2024). It is not about translating from one language to another but rather, about using all available linguistic resources in a flexible and dynamic way to express oneself or understand others. In a classroom setting, translanguaging encourages students to use their full language repertoire to learn and engage with content. As a pedagogical strategy in the tutorials, translanguaging supports students to use their first language or other languages they know as a resource for learning, allowing them to think in multiple languages, which has the potential to deepen their understanding and improve their ability to articulate their innovative ideas, creating a more inclusive learning environment where students' diverse linguistic backgrounds are valued (Letsela, 2021).

The translanguaging tutorials interventions implemented encourage multilingual students to engage with academic content and new knowledge using their full linguistic repertoires, including Sesotho, Afrikaans, Sesotho, isiZulu, Setswana, and so on. Tutors, often multilingual themselves (but not compulsory), facilitate the learning process through small-group discussions, explanations, questions, and collaborative meaning-making in both African languages and English. This approach not only enhances comprehension but affirms students' linguistic identities and cultural backgrounds (Makalela, 2015). In the context of the translanguaging tutorials, translanguaging is framed not just as a small-group multilingual learning strategy, but as a pedagogical stance that values the full linguistic repertoires of students, enabling them to shuttle meaning across languages and thereby access more equitable learning experiences (Madiba, 2024). Drawing on a decolonial perspective, efforts were made to ensure that the translanguaging tutorial interventions provide a liberatory voice that valorises pride in students' identities as multilingual speakers, thus enabling transformative praxis at the university.

Staff Development on Multilingual Pedagogies

Since 2024, the university also invested in capacity building for the academic staff and tutors through workshops on multilingual pedagogies, translanguaging theory, and linguistic inclusivity. These workshops are grounded in the principle that transformation must begin with epistemological re-orientation, encouraging lecturers and tutors to reimagine their own teaching practices and challenge the coloniality of English-only instruction. In practice, multilingual pedagogies embody a range of teaching strategies that

make use of students' full linguistic repertoires including translanguaging, code-switching, and parallel medium instruction (Garcia & Lin, 2016). They also refer to the:

Teaching and learning approaches that actively recognise, validate, and utilise the full range of students' linguistic repertoires, including Indigenous languages, and global languages, in the classroom. (Garcia & Lin, 2016, p. 1)

Makalela (2015) added that these multilingual pedagogical approaches view language use as fluid and dynamic, challenging the notion of rigid language boundaries common in monolingual education systems. They encourage teachers and students to draw from multiple languages for meaning-making. Multilingual pedagogies also acknowledge that language is fluid and not fixed; therefore, multilingual students and teachers often move fluidly across the languages they have at their disposal, blending linguistic resources depending on the context and purpose.

The multilingual pedagogies interventions are meant to bring awareness to the academics and tutors that while the university language policy insists on English as medium of instruction, the reality is that the students in their classrooms are not English monolingual; they are the native speakers of various African Indigenous languages who speak English as second or third language. During the workshops, academics are empowered to purposefully design tasks and activities that allow for multilingual engagement in the classrooms using small peer learning groups in home languages or through the use of multilingual terminology or glossaries. Multilingual pedagogies workshops provide a platform for academics to critically reflect, through activities, on how they can enable social justice and inclusivity, and disable linguistic hierarchies in their classrooms (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021).

Multilingual pedagogies underpinned by a decolonial perspective reject monolingual colonial legacies that elevate the English medium of instruction while erasing African Indigenous languages as languages for learning and teaching (Banda & Simungala, 2023). Decolonial multilingual pedagogies resist this by reclaiming and re-centring African languages and epistemologies. A decolonial lens of multilingual pedagogies empowers academics and tutors to challenge who and what counts in education, and works to redistribute this power more equitably. Banda and Simungala (2023) added that such multilingual pedagogies are transformative.

Writing Support for Multilingual Postgraduates

Academic writing support for multilingual postgraduate students remains crucial for both equity and academic success in higher education. The support is most critical in a context like South Africa where most postgraduate students are expected to produce dissertations and theses written in a foreign language—English. When postgraduate students write in a second language, they often face unique challenges due to differences in linguistic background, academic conventions across cultures, and varying levels of familiarity with disciplinary writing norms.

The purpose of the university writing support interventions for multilingual postgraduate students is to provide multilingual students with writing strategies and techniques to strengthen their confidence in writing across different languages, their home languages, and the second language. Often, in the English monolingual and rigid postgraduate writing contexts, multilingual students' home languages are overlooked and silenced in pursuit of imposing English native writing practices on them (Seltzer, 2020). Consequently, multilingual writing support leverages the voices of the marginalised languages that the multilingual students bring into the writing processes. According to Smith et al. (2017, p. 7), a multilingual approach to writing also fosters linguistic heterogeneity writing; it “empowers writers with the agency to shape their own language practices and challenges the monolingual ideology.” The multilingual writing workshops emphasise the fluidity of linguistic repertoires that multilingual students bring to the writing processes and encourage them to draw from these multiple linguistic resources for meaning-making in their writing process. Canagarajah (2022) also asserted that multilingual writing approaches decolonise conventional writing practices by embracing non-standard linguistic resources of students.

In fact, the multilingual writing workshops build on translanguaging perspectives that the linguistic repertoires of multilingual writers do not operate in independent compounds in their minds; instead, they co-exist in permeable and collective ways. Thus, they empower the multilingual writers to confidently and

intentionally draw on the strength of the variety of linguistic resources at their disposal without relying on named languages during the writing process (Seltzer, 2020). This implies that in writing practice, the meaning-making process of multilingual writers during a writing process is not restricted to a particular language but is made possible by pulling together an assemblage of linguistic resources at their disposal, including those repertoires that are formal or recognised and those that are not. In the context of this paper, the academic writing workshops of multilingual postgraduate students are provided virtually and face-to-face. From a decolonial perspective, the multilingual writing interventions recognise that academic writing is not just a technical skill but an epistemic act that should accommodate different ways of thinking, knowing, and expressing (Seltzer, 2020).

Opportunities of the University Multilingual Interventions

The interventions described above offer multiple opportunities for pedagogical transformation, advancing linguistic justice, and repositioning African languages as legitimate carriers of academic knowledge. When grounded in a decolonial framework, these multilingual practices do more than improve comprehension—they begin to reimagine the university's epistemic structures in different ways. Firstly, multilingual practices create academic spaces that are inclusive such that students can engage with disciplinary epistemologies in the languages that engage their cognitive faculties. Ngubane (2024) argued when students are enabled to utilise all their linguistic resources for learning it promotes deeper understanding, critical thinking, active engagement, and participation. It also affirms their right to learn in one's own language, a principle that is central to social justice and decolonial perspectives.

Translanguaging Tutorials, Academic Access, and Success

Research shows that multilingual students who engage with content through participating in multilingual tutorials have better opportunities of improving their comprehension and academic performance than those who only attend English-only lectures (Madiba, 2024). Findings from studies such as that of (Letsela, 2021) particularly pointed out that multilingual tutorials are more critical in the first year of study where students are often overwhelmed by the demands of academic language, English. Translanguaging tutorials therefore also serve as academic peer support to strengthen the grasp of concepts through facilitating understanding using English and all the languages students command. Using their diverse home languages, translanguaging tutorials provide an environment where students can discuss, debate, ask questions, and translate each other's questions and receive feedback on their questions in languages they understand best (Ngubane & Ntombela, 2020). According to García and Wei (2014), the fluid movement across academic language and students' home languages challenges the traditional language boundaries and repositions students as active participants and knowledge co-creators.

Multilingual Pedagogies and Transformative, Decolonial Instruction

Multilingual pedagogies have been praised for pushing teachers to question and rethink their assumptions about language and responsive pedagogies (Peercy et al., 2022). When implemented over a period, multilingual pedagogies have the potential to revolutionise universities into transformative and inclusive educational spaces. They do not only transform the linguistic practices of students and teachers, they also actively validate students' full linguistic repertoires (Garcia & Lin, 2016). By disrupting linguistic hierarchies that privilege dominant languages such as English, multilingual pedagogies can be a catalyst for social justice and decolonisation. In essence, the transformative nature of multilingual pedagogies does not lie merely in adding the presence of many languages to the classroom, it is in how these multiple languages are enabled and activated to reshape power relations, classroom dynamics, and students' identities as knowers (Peercy et al., 2022).

Challenges of Implementing Multilingual Interventions

While multilingual interventions can bring about promising possibilities for the transformation and decolonisation of university pedagogical practices, their implementation can also be hampered by systematic, ideological, and practical institutional challenges. These challenges include English hegemony in the institutional policy, resource constraints, and attitudes and resistance from staff and students.

English Hegemony in the Institutional Language Policy

Despite institutional commitment to multilingualism in its language policy document (University of the Free State, 2023), in practice, the hegemony of English as medium of instruction undermines any efforts to implement multilingualism. In practice, the system such the curriculum, assessment, postgraduate writing, and so on, is still largely carried out in English. Without an alignment between policy and practice, multilingualism risks remaining a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive change (Banda & Simungala, 2023). In other words, the powerful status of English undermines the legitimacy of African Indigenous languages as languages of knowledge construction and production, which consequently constrains the institutional uptake of multilingualism, especially in the academic spaces.

Limited Resources

The development of multilingual resources and materials such as multilingual terminologies and tutor manuals for translanguaging requires significant human and financial resources. Often, that is also lack of expertise to efficiently drive the implementation of the multilingual practices in the departments and this threatens the sustainability of the interventions (Madiba, 2014).

Attitudes and Resistance of Students and Staff

Lack of understanding of multilingualism often leads to staff and students believing that it is meant to “lower” the education standards or put pressure on academic staff to speak or understand students’ diverse linguistic repertoires. As a result, multilingual interventions are viewed as a burden for academic staff who often cite issues related to the lack of multilingual resources for successful implementation of multilingual practices (Madiba, 2024). Often, students have doubts about the value of using their African Indigenous languages for learning and teaching, preferring to stick with English for the sake of academic and professional mobility.

Suggestions for Effective Implementation of Multilingual Interventions

If multilingual interventions are to move beyond the tokenism of the language policy and be transformative and decolonial, they should be holistic and strategic. The following suggestions are meant to support and enhance the implementation of multilingual practices in higher education.

First and foremost, universities must accelerate the development and intellectualisation of African Indigenous languages so that they become languages of academia like English (and Afrikaans). Intellectualisation of African Indigenous languages would enlarge multilingual resources and materials, which are crucial for the utilisation of these languages for teaching, learning, and research in domains such as engineering, health, law, and so on. This would elevate their status among other international languages like English, and among the speakers of African Indigenous languages.

Second, institutions must embed multilingualism not as an “add-on” or compliance tool, but as a foundational academic principle. Multilingual practices should unambiguously align their teaching, learning, and research strategies with language justice and epistemic diversity, ensuring that multilingualism informs curriculum design, assessment, and pedagogy (Madiba, 2024). Importantly, the effective implementation of multilingual interventions requires financial commitment and dedicated strategic funding for the development of multilingual teaching resources, academic glossaries, translation services, and interpreting services.

Another suggestion is that universities should create neutral multilingual centres and units that are responsible for the coordination of multilingual interventions across the university faculties so that this task does not become a burden for academics in the language departments. Multilingual entities should, however, work closely with language experts. Continuous training of academics on multilingual pedagogies and translanguaging tutors and facilitators is also key for capacity building on transformative and responsive pedagogies.

The suggestions provided above should not cast multilingualism interventions as a “technical fix” but as an institutional strategic commitment to transform pedagogies and promote social justice and knowledge decolonisation. A decolonial mindset that disrupts entrenched colonial norms should drive the implementation of multilingual interventions in the institutions.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper critically explored how multilingual practices are being leveraged at a South African university as both a transformative and a decolonial project. Drawing on decolonial theory, it argued that multilingualism, when conceptualised beyond access and framed as a transformative epistemic project, has the potential to disrupt the coloniality of knowledge that continues to structure higher education in South Africa. The paper argued that multilingualism, when approached not as an add-on but as an epistemic right, opens up spaces for African languages and ways of knowing to thrive in academia. The university's interventions, including translanguaging tutorials, multilingual academic resources, and staff development initiatives, demonstrate promising steps toward linguistic and epistemic justice. These efforts open up new possibilities for inclusion, academic success, and the affirmation of African languages as academic resources. They point to the emergence of a pluriversal academic space where diverse ways of knowing and being are acknowledged and legitimised.

The paper also argued that the implementation of multilingualism is not without its contradictions and challenges, which include English hegemony, limited resources, and staff and students' resistance, to mention a few. Methodically, the paper employed critical analysis of emerging themes such as multilingualism, multilingual pedagogies, translanguaging tutorials, and multilingual writing interventions. The article concludes by arguing that multilingualism must be central, not peripheral in higher education, and it recommends systemic shifts in pedagogy, policy, and institutional culture to realise its full transformative potential.

To move forward, the paper suggests that universities must adopt a bold, systemic approach to multilingualism—one that is adequately resourced, institutionally embedded, and grounded in the lived realities of students and staff. This involves not only changing pedagogical practices but also confronting the deeper epistemic assumptions that shape whose knowledge counts and in what language it is validated. In conclusion, the effective implementation of multilingualism offers a powerful pathway toward reimagining the university as a space of epistemic freedom, linguistic dignity, and decolonial possibility. But this requires more than policy, it demands courageous leadership, sustained commitment, and a willingness to unsettle the coloniality that continues to haunt the academy in South Africa and beyond.

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Decolonising Our Teaching by Embracing Drama Pedagogy and Theatre in Education in Higher Education Classes

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Abstract

The pedagogy that characterises higher education classes tends to align predominantly to a banking approach to teaching, where the lecturer is central to the teaching process while the students are passive recipients of the knowledge with limited opportunities for critical engagement and reflection on the content presented to the class. The outcome of this approach to teaching and learning is the development of a passive citizenry with limited critical and creative thinking skills; the kind of citizenry required by a neoliberal society with its market-driven economy, capitalistic outlook, and profit-driven agenda. The implementation of drama pedagogy and theatre in education in our university classes offers the potential to subvert this narrative by tapping into the students' funds of knowledge and stimulating students to think critically and creatively as they engage with specific themes and issues covered in their university lectures. It is with this background in mind that we provide a critical reflection, in this article, on how drama pedagogy and theatre in education have the potential to contribute to decolonising teaching and learning by focusing on the development of students' critical and creative thinking skills so that they can become agents of change to confront social injustice. Through our engagement with these arts-based pedagogies, we will shed light on the crux of their epistemology, their historical background, and examine their pedagogical significance based on our personal insights and experiences, and how they could be applied within university classes to decolonise students' thinking.

Keywords: drama pedagogy, theatre in education, arts-based approaches, teaching and learning, decolonising pedagogy

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Introduction

There is widespread student dissatisfaction with teaching in higher education, fundamentally with pedagogical practices that perpetuate colonised curricula, exclude minority voices, limit collaborative learning, and draw on restrictive assessment regimes (Govender, 2015; Segabutla & Evans, 2019). These practices, negatively impacting students' engagement, have been exacerbated by a dominant turn to neoliberalism in the last 30 years. This neoliberalist trend has meant higher education has become more corporate-based, maintained through managerialism and top-down control, developing a culture of employee accountability imbuing a sense of fear to be innovative and creative.

Decoloniality, as it applies to pedagogy and curriculum, has been defined as an inherently plural set of practices interrupting the dominant power/knowledge matrix in educational practices in higher education (Morreira et al., 2020). These practices affect both what knowledge is produced via research and then selected for a curriculum (what content is taught), and the ways in which teaching and learning and assessment occur. Morreira et al. (2020, p. 2) went further, suggesting that pragmatics and action are now required to move beyond theorisation of decolonisation arguing,

that while debates on decoloniality and decolonisation have proliferated at a theoretical level, work on operationalising them within the academy is just beginning; and that there is a gap between high level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation.

For us, in this article, a decolonising agenda is an imperative that goes beyond challenging Eurocentrism of curriculum design and colonially inherited pedagogies (though these are important to address), to design approaches celebrating cultural and individual diversity while challenging hegemonic knowledge production and power relationships embedded in neoliberal education. In this, we are responding to Giroux's (2010, p. 185) critique of higher education as having,

Bare pedagogy [one in which] compassion is a weakness, moral responsibility is scorned because it places human needs over market considerations . . . [and] education is stripped of its public values, critical contents, and civic responsibilities.

A restrictive set of didactic pedagogical practices, assuming learners as passive recipients of bodies of knowledge, has dominated education for much of its history. Despite developments in scholarship and research in the psychology of learning in the latter part of the 20th century, for example, through constructivism and socialised learning, teaching practices have been slow to change. We still see students trapped behind desks or tables, lecturers marooned behind lecterns and imprisoned by dependence on technology. In this way, higher education teaching maintains a metaphysical dualism that splits the mind from the body (Sutherland, 2011). To address neoliberally dominated and colonised practices of higher education and this dualism, and to respond to Morreira et al.'s (2020) calls for action on implementation, we propose turning to the arts and in particular, drama. We explore the potential of drama pedagogy and theatre in education as approaches to decolonise our teaching within university classroom spaces. In doing so we aim to get beyond Giroux's (2010, p. 189) "bare pedagogy" to "provide students with the humanistic knowledge, technical knowledge, scientific skill, and a mode of literacy that enables them to engage and transform, when necessary, the promise of a global democracy."

Rather than a literature review or purely theoretical exercise, we conceive this article as a polemical statement of our position as regards the use of drama in its different forms in achieving improved pedagogy, challenging the deleterious impacts of colonisation and neoliberalism in higher education. In our discussions of drama pedagogy and theatre in education or applied theatre, we provide examples from our own practices with students but, while we explore the beneficial impacts for learning and wider student emancipation, we are mindful of the developmental needs for faculty. Before considering some of the specific features of theatre in education and drama pedagogy, it is necessary to set these in the context of wider inclusion of arts-based pedagogies in higher education.

Arts-Based Pedagogy

In the last 10 years, there has been increasing systemic activity in educational systems, recognising the value of the arts and the contribution they make to improving the pedagogical landscape at multidisciplinary and subject levels (Braund & Reiss, 2019; Li & Qi, 2025). We see this as partly connected to the historic and colonially derived structuring of education into disciplines. Disciplines of the curriculum create boundaries limiting cross-disciplinary collaboration. Subject discipline boundaries, generally strengthened by an accountability and performance culture embedded in educational systems, mitigate against a more open agenda and epistemology where collaboration and creativity contribute to investigative and problem-solving approaches (Harris & de Bruin, 2018). It is here that arts-based pedagogies have potential as boundary-crossing methodologies providing increased student engagement and empowerment through improved and more equitable access to knowledge and skills.

Hunter and Frawley (2022) defined arts-based pedagogy as a process by which students can observe and reflect on an art form to link different disciplines, thus encouraging students to lean into uncomfortable subject matter and explore their place within it in the wider world. Arts-based pedagogy encompasses creating, performing, observing, using, integrating, and reflecting on art to understand other areas of knowledge and experience. For example, considering the use of fine arts, medical students at the University of California used masterpieces by Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Kandinsky, and Da Vinci to improve observation and pattern recognition skills in clinical situations (Shapiro et al., 2006). An unexpected outcome was that medical students following the fine arts programme developed better skills in emotional recognition, cultivation of empathy, identification of story and narrative, and awareness of multiple perspectives. In the wider context of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, there have been moves in several countries to include the arts, redefining the STEM acronym as STEAM. An extreme manifestation of how far arts-based pedagogy has influenced curriculum policy and design is seen in South Korea, which has redefined STEM education as STEAM across all phases in a call to improve creativity and innovation (Baek et al., 2011). We wonder, however, if this is not just an example of pandering to neoliberal capitalism in improving industrial competitiveness, rather than for more altruistic educational benefits for students.

Perhaps arts-based pedagogy strategies work because they tap into the visual thinking of student learners. It has been said that today's young people inhabit a multimodal world dominated by television, video games, computers, tablets, films, and so on. However, it has also been claimed that visual thinking translates into problem-solving ability. Visual thinkers literally "see" their answers to problems, enabling them to build entire information systems using their imaginations (Gangwer, 2009). We add a note of caution here because what we envisage, as we explain in the next section, is using methods from the drama and theatre world that allow students to be highly active and collaborative and not mere recipients of visualised experiences. In achieving this, our aim is to challenge and address what Lehmann (2006, p. 16) saw as the weakening, "of active energies of imagination . . . in a civilization of the primarily passive consumption of images and data."

Drama Pedagogy and Theatre in Education

Drama and theatre work in educational contexts goes by many names, including, drama in education, theatre in education, applied drama, applied theatre, educational drama, dramatic inquiry, role-play, creative drama, improvisation, process drama, and forum theatre. The key difference we conceive between drama work and theatre in education is that, while the former is non-performative in nature or “process orientated,” the latter is directed towards a “performative product,” but often for an audience that is participative rather than one in a conventional theatre, which is passive (Dawson & Lee, 2018, p. 5). The focus of both drama pedagogy and theatre in education can be characterised as exploratory and reflective in nature given that their focus is on inquiry into specific themes and issues explored by the participants through interactive meaning-making, predominantly in educational settings. In the context of this paper, we aim to examine the potential of drama and theatre in education to decolonise teaching and learning within higher education contexts through a focus on process and practice. Interspersed with our discussion of key aspects and intentions of these forms of drama in education are some examples from our own teaching and, more occasionally, from studies reported in the literature.

Drama Pedagogy (DP)

According to Dawson and Lee (2018, p. 17), drama pedagogy is an approach that uses “active and dramatic approaches to engage students in academic, affective and aesthetic learning through dialogic meaning-making in all areas of the curriculum.” As a pedagogical approach, it aims to balance both the form and content of drama so that the participants can embrace the dramatic experience by learning about issues and concepts raised through drama (Bethlenfalvy, 2020). DP, as we have said, is conceived variously but within the context of this article, we will use the terms drama pedagogy (DP) and applied drama (AD) as we interrogate its value as a decolonised pedagogy based on its processes and practices.

In their analysis of the key features of DP, Dawson and Lee (2018, p. 17) averred that it aims “to engage students in academic, affective and aesthetic learning through dialogic meaning-making in all areas of the curriculum.” Hence, there is a clear alignment to sociocultural and critical theories of learning (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, Vygotsky, 1978) in the classroom, where participants co-construct their understanding and personal identities as part of the classroom culture (Dawson & Lee, 2018). This pedagogy enables the participants to not only be actively engaged in the meaning-making process through interactive drama-based activities, but also to reflect on the processes, issues, and activities (Dewey, 1934/1994). Consequently, through the process, the participants use a variety of communication approaches to construct, convey, and reflect on meaning derived from the experience. Hence, DP offers opportunities for new ways of approaching, exploring, and deepening understanding of the content (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025). Techniques commonly include the use of tableaux, improvisation, slow motion, thought-tracking, inner thoughts, eavesdropping, and hot seating (Neelands, 2009). During the process, verbal language, gestures, spatial placement, movement, costume, and objects can be used (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025).

One of the most important figures in the development of DP in education was Dorothy Heathcote (Bolton & Heathcote, 1995). For Heathcote, a *process drama* involved participants and facilitators stepping into situations and taking different roles that develop by their involvement in the drama. The drama process, which is initiated with a *pre-text*, conceptualised as a preliminary plan, focuses on how to proceed, what drama strategies to use, and what issues to explore (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025). This pre-text stage often involves participants having researched background for the roles, approaching the drama from the idea of having assumed a *mantle of expert*. Consequently, although the facilitator guides the process, it is often adapted or spearheaded by the participants, and is perceived as fluid in nature, because the participants become co-creators of the process. A key feature of DP of this type, that we will loosely call

“process drama,” is that the “dramatic piece” evolves in relation to the participants’ input, while they are participating in the experience and engaging with the drama activities facilitated by the educator (O’Neill, 1995; Österlind & Hallgren, 2025).

Within the context of our own teaching in higher education contexts, we used tableaux, improvisation, and role play to interrogate discrimination in society based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic status, religion, and disability, amongst others. The students’ engagement with these issues, through embodied learning experiences, enabled them to share their own stories relating to discrimination, present them through drama activities, and to critically engage and reflect on the issues that they raise (Athimoolam, 2018). In this way, we consider our teaching practice to be decolonising in nature because it creates spaces for our students to critically reflect on and engage with issues of discrimination, marginalisation, and othering, which are features of colonised, neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning (Athimoolam, 2018). Thus, we consider DP as a decolonising approach to teaching and learning, because it promotes student voice and does not perceive the lecturer as the only purveyor of knowledge in the classroom (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970).

Given its transformative nature, DP, furthermore, has the potential to contribute significantly to decolonising teaching and learning in higher education contexts because it affords students the opportunity to explore social issues through multiple lenses, thereby deepening their insights. To provide an example from our own teaching, our students in a third-year Bachelor of Education (Intermediate Phase) module, Issues and Challenges in Education, demonstrated how, through the creation of tableaux with their bodies, hegemony manifests in society, by depicting a scene that portrayed two groups: those who achieved success in a capitalist society, and those who were marginalised (Athimoolam, 2018). Through the application of DP and a process of action and reflection (praxis) the students were able to engage more interactively with the concept hegemony than had we adopted a banking model, which tends to predominate in higher education contexts (Freire, 2018). In this way DP offers embodied modes of expression that critically engage with power and oppression, thereby drawing the epistemological and practical aspects of drama together through a process of interactive meaning-making (Blair, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2025).

Given that building trust, navigating through struggle, and learning how to co-create as a community of students are key artistic skills in DP, students feel comfortable to use their imagination and body to convey their stories (Dawson & Lee, 2018). The community of practice and support created through the drama process motivates students to tap into their creative potential, thereby contributing to enriching learning experiences for all of them. According to research, higher education institutions, in many respects, fail to foster and promote a feeling of belonging amongst students, which is crucial for their psychological well-being (Osterman, 2010). DP, however, offers a way to build upon and incorporate a sense of belonging or ensemble among lecturers and students that is vital for student success (Dawson & Lee, 2018). In our workshop sessions with students in our third-year Education module, we discovered that they felt comfortable working collaboratively with their peers as part of a community of practice because they perceived it as a safe space where they could share their ideas freely and spontaneously (Athimoolam, 2018, 2021). An advantage of such a process is that it enables critical engagement with issues of concern, thereby encouraging dialogue, debate, reflection, and critique, which serves to frame a decolonised approach to teaching and learning in higher education contexts (Freire, 2018).

During the drama process, students are often invited to create new meaning based on what they know about and see within a situation, which stimulates their imagination (Dawson & Lee, 2018). When people are afforded opportunities to imagine, they fill in the gap between what they know and what they believe is possible. Rather than just working in the *as is* world, DP affords participants the opportunity to bring the *as is* world into the *as if* (Bolton & Heathcote, 1995), creating and recreating and imagining and reimagining the world of the classroom and the world of the story (Edmiston, 2014). Through their

engagement with the as if world, they can escape from reality and use their imagination to create whatever future they would like to be a part of. We see this as stimulating interactive meaning-making, which has the potential to develop students' critical and creative thinking skills, and helps subvert neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning that focus on the principles of measurement and testing (Morreira et al., 2020).

Theatre in Education

We conceive theatre in education (TiE) as the use of theatre and drama practices for interactive learning experiences so that the audience is actively engaged in the piece of theatre in various ways, and not alienated or disconnected from it. This contrasts with conventionally staged theatre where the audience is passive. According to Lu (2002), the aim of this form of interactive theatre is to stimulate creative learning through theatrical experiences so that the audience is fully engaged. The TiE process is initiated by the sharing of ideas on a social issue that culminates in the development of a piece of theatre that engages the participants and the audience during the process (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995).

From now on, we conceive this interactive version of TiE as applied theatre (AT). According to Prendergast and Saxton (2013) AT includes TiE, theatre of the oppressed, museum theatre, community-based theatre, and theatre for development. Hence, it is an inclusive concept that encompasses a range of theories and practices that make use of theatre for a variety of purposes (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021). This is especially significant within higher education contexts if we are entrusted with the role of creating a critical citizenry who espouse a problem-based approach to learning, and who adopt critical ways of knowing and thinking (Freire, 1970). Plays that adopt the applied theatre format strive to involve the audience interactively in the scenic game, which narrows the gap considerably between the audience and the actors in the play.

During one of our workshops that we presented in our third-year education module, Issues in Education (PGED 302), students workshopped a play entitled *Still I Rise*, which was based on how a young boy, growing up in a gangster-ridden environment, was able to realise his dream of becoming a motivational speaker. The students felt that the play, which was loosely based on a true story, should be presented to a wider audience because it had an important message to convey (Athimoolam, 2021). Later, the play was showcased to disadvantaged learners from poor backgrounds, for whom a space was created to interact with the actors and to also share their own insights and stories, based on their experiences. In this way, TiE can have a wider purpose, especially if it offers opportunities for the audience to engage with the issues highlighted to share their own stories, and to reflect on how the issues engaged with in the play resonate with their own experiences (Boal, 1979). Cordero Ramos and Muñoz Bellerin (2019), found that because AT created spaces for recognising people in vulnerable situations, they were motivated to combat the feeling of invisibility they usually experienced. Consequently, as suggested by Songe-Møller and Bjerkestrand (2012), inclusive spaces could be established to combat ignorance, stereotypes, and the stigmatisation of various groups, thereby breaking down prejudices and creating spaces for decolonised approaches to teaching and learning across multiple contexts (Athimoolam, 2021).

It is with this in mind that Prendergast and Saxon (2013) viewed play building as a continuous process of negotiated meaning-making where all the members of the group work collaboratively in a workshop type setting for the creation of the play. Such a process changes the work relationships between the producer and the participants, especially in terms of how the process is managed, given that a producer's role changes to that of a facilitator rather than as the traditional producer of a piece of theatre for a passive receptive audience. Hence, the story line created in this way, could either follow a linear pattern or incorporate various intertwined stories based on a nonlinear approach (Prendergast & Saxon, 2013). It is through this collaborative meaning-making process, as we discovered in our own practice, that social issues can be more effectively interrogated, critiqued, and engaged with.

Hence, flowing from the above scenario, TiE enables teachers to work with a methodology open to creativity:

Leading to a change in mentality, symbols or stereotypes; making possible the development of a critical capacity, self-reflection and interpretation of practices, aimed at the achievement of a comprehension of the world as a form of new conscience. (Solis, 2018, p. 31)

This creation of a new conscience is closely aligned to decolonised ways of teaching and learning and a notion of *conscientisation* espoused by Freire (1970). According to Freire (1970, p. 24), “teaching without learning does not exist” in the sense that teaching is not just transferring knowledge “if not to create the possibilities of its production or its construction.” Like DP, the main feature of theatre is a focus on making theatre from a collective point of view in collaboration with others for enhanced meaning-making (Neelands, 2009). Theatre and theatrical techniques insist on participation and collaboration because they galvanise the group for enhanced meaning-making and critical reflection, as we have found in our own workshop sessions with our education students in the Issues and Challenges in Education module (Athiemoolam, 2021; Solis, 2018).

Freire’s (1970) notion of critical pedagogy, combined with interactive performance practice (Boal, 1979), has the potential to lead to the creation of a learning community that empowers participants, generates critical understanding, and which promotes transformation (Boal, 1979). This was demonstrated in one enactment of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, where student performers created an interactive drama piece that explored body image related to social pressures. By participating in the play, students engaged in critical reflection on cultural norms and expectations and developed a richer understanding of the performance process. According to Solis (2018), the work of Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) provide a strong link between AD, social justice, and education. Boal (1979) demonstrated how social justice issues could be effectively interrogated through his development of Forum Theatre (FT).

For Boal (1979), FT is conceptualised as a rehearsed play that focuses on some form of oppression, which concludes in conflict. Its aim is to practise how to “counteract oppression, shift the power balance, and find better solutions” (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025, p. 21). The play always includes a protagonist, who is represented as a victim of oppression or injustice and an antagonist, an oppressor, who maintains the injustice, characters who support the oppressor, and bystanders who may or may not support the victim’s efforts to change the situation (Boal, 1979). After the performance, the audience is invited by a Joker (facilitator) to assume the role of the oppressed, and to confront the oppression, try to overcome obstacles, and explore different ways of solving the problem. In this way, the members of the audience are transformed from being spectators to becoming a *spect-actors* (Boal, 1979), ready to take on the role and to confront the oppression (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025) so that the oppressive situation could be resolved through multiple lenses.

In an examination of Boal’s (1979) work, FT represents the most well-known form of Theatre of the Oppressed, which evolved when his theatre company performed for peasants and workers in Brazil during the 1960s (Solis, 2018). Their performances first presented a conflict culminating in a crisis, then the audience was invited to suggest solutions on how to deal with the conflict, and these suggestions were performed by the actors. On one occasion, a spectator who was dissatisfied with how the actor performed the proposed solution was invited on stage. At that moment, a significant change occurred because from that moment on, no-one knew what would transpire. Consequently, this form of audience participation, which became a core practice in FT, has proven to be a powerful tool (Ganguly, 2010; Sedano-Solis, 2019).

According to Massó-Guijarro et al. (2021, p. 339), Boal’s (1979) engagement with the concept *spect-actors* changes the passive receptive behaviour of the audience thereby leading to the creation of a mirror “in which the community can look at and actively question itself in a critical manner.” Furthermore, within certain conventions of AT, there is a blurring of the boundaries between theatre and life because they are perceived as “representing dramatized images of the subjective realities experienced by each actor and by the collective as a whole” (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021, p. 339). Hence, in this way, intellectual and emotional engagement are promoted for all those present in the performance, which offers opportunities for greater empathy and understanding—especially for those in vulnerable social situations (McQuaid & Plastow, 2017). This aligns to our own work in using TiE as a strategy to conscientise our students to social injustice and how these issues could be critically engaged with and interrogated using a play for critical reflection and enhanced meaning-making (Athiemoolam, 2018, 2021).

Discussion

In reflecting on the current neoliberal pedagogy that predominates in higher education contexts, we contend that there is a disconnectedness in teaching and learning because lecturers tend to focus on addressing the needs of the students' minds at the expense of their bodies. This leads to what Dawson and Lee (2018) described as the mind/body split in higher education contexts, which is disadvantageous for effective learning and meaning-making. Through the integration of the mind and the body, as espoused by DP and TiE, students are afforded opportunities to show who they are and to demonstrate their understanding in more dynamic ways, which have the potential to develop critical and creative thinking skills (Dawson & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, as noted by Vygotsky (1978, p. 84), every child in school "always has a previous history," including cultural experiences that can be incorporated into teaching and learning in university classes. Closing the mind/body split within the context of teaching in higher education contexts and creating opportunities for students to integrate their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2005) into their dramatic presentations could enhance students' critical and creative thinking skills, thereby enabling them to develop a greater sense of agency to confront social injustice. Furthermore, given that dance, drama, and music represent important modes of learning in African culture, incorporating these art forms in DP and TiE could contribute significantly to promoting learning in higher education contexts (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

When describing what constitutes education, many lecturers tend to focus on the academic curriculum or what is to be taught and examined. This picture provides a limited view of what happens in university classes. For Vygotsky (1978), the core components of our consciousness are intellect and affect. While the intellect can be thought of as the rational, logical, academic curriculum in the classroom, the affect refers to a hidden curriculum. University lecturers are astutely aware of how their teaching is impacted by cultural, social, and emotional learning (Dawson & Lee, 2018)—or we think they should be. When education attempts to separate "the intellectual side of our consciousness from its affective, volitional side," the result is separation "from all the fullness of real life, from living motives, interests, and attractions of the thinking human" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 14). We maintain that it is through the application of DP and TiE that the academic and affective components of the curriculum can be integrated for more holistic teaching and learning. Because the affect and intellect/academic components are mutually dependent according to Vygotsky (1978), DP and TiE, aligned to aesthetic experiences, are essential for enabling students to engage both the intellect (the mind) and the affect (the emotions; Boal, 1979).

Furthermore, because the process allows for the retelling and authoring of narratives, participants can examine whose stories have been told and presented as truth and whose stories are missing. This creates opportunities for re-examining stories in more inclusive ways by engaging in a process of retelling, which represents an important feature of decolonising work in education (Nicholson, 2005). In the retelling and authoring of narratives through drama, participants can also investigate whose stories have been told and accepted as truth and then attempt to counter these stories in more inclusive ways (Nicholson, 2005). Hence, through DP participants are motivated to "embody, explore, investigate, and rewrite narratives through their collective imagination" (Dawson & Lee, 2018, p. 21). Thus, AD and theatre processes can contribute to making the invisible visible by telling the other stories (McQuaid & Plastow 2017; Saeed, 2015). In one example, certain experiences of AT were aimed at empowering and making visible the capacities of disabled people by motivating them to show what they could do through questioning ableism, and using the social model of disability as opposed to the medical model (Athiemoolam, 2021; Genova, 2015). This enabled its transformative impact to be understood from a multidimensional, rhizomatic, and non-hierarchical perspective (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Freire's (2018) contention that inequality is sustained when most marginalised people are unable to reflect on their social conditions indicates that there is a need for pedagogy that engages participants

fully in the learning process. It is with this in mind that he believed that critical consciousness, praxis, and dialogue are crucial for interactive meaning-making. While he perceived critical consciousness as recognising and analysing systems of inequality, praxis enables participants to engage in action and reflection for enhanced meaning-making (Jemal, 2017), and dialogism promotes the sharing of ideas to deepen thinking and for critical engagement with issues (Hamilton et al., 2025). The above-mentioned principles highlighted by Freire (2018) are at the core of DP and TiE, thereby demonstrating their value in terms of promoting critical and creative thinking skills for enhanced learning.

Given that the notions of change and transformation are at the very heart of AT practices (Motos & Ferrandis, 2015) some authors have spoken directly of “theatre for change” (Landy & Montgomery, 2012, p. 20). Authors such as Hargrave (2010) and Haseman and Winston (2010) warned against the dangers of considering AT as a panacea that guarantees success and to instead focus on the contradictions and mismatches between the “good” intention and the real effects. Moreover, some studies on art and social transformation point out how these practices can be paradoxical in nature because they can reinforce stereotypes or increase the inequalities that they aimed to address (Infantino, 2020; Preston, 2011). Thus, it is imperative that facilitators democratise spaces by implementing strategies that subvert and deconstruct normative beliefs that certain groups are culturally inferior to others by encouraging inclusive participation of all people regardless of gender, age, social class, disability, or educational level.

Conclusion

In reflecting on our notion of what constitutes decolonising approaches to teaching and learning in higher education, we have endeavoured to examine the value of DP and TiE as pedagogies that could subvert banking, neoliberal approaches to education that tend to focus on teacher-centred approaches to teaching featured in standardised testing. In terms of the value of DP and TiE, based on our arguments, it emerges that these pedagogies have the potential to contribute significantly to developing students’ critical and creative thinking skills. Furthermore, they have the potential to subvert narrow-minded parochial thinking that characterises current neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning in higher education contexts that deny students of a voice.

We argue in this article, that if teaching and learning in higher education contexts is to transform young minds to engage with social justice issues in more palpable ways for enhanced learning, then it is incumbent on us as academics to explore how this could be realised through arts-based approaches. It is with this in mind, that we present a case for the implementation of DP and TiE in higher education contexts given that they have the potential to engage students more interactively for enhanced meaning-making and to give them a voice. Furthermore, through the processes of dialogical engagement, problem-based learning, and reflective practice, these pedagogies have the potential to promote critical and creative thinking on much higher levels and, in the process, decolonise teaching and learning in higher education contexts.

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Research Studies on the Role of African Languages for Curriculum Transformation and Decolonisation in Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities around the world are recognised for knowledge discovery, knowledge production, knowledge dissemination, and transformation. Research shows that English and Afrikaans are still the dominant languages for knowledge discovery, production, and dissemination in South Africa. Student movements during 2015 and 2016 raised issues about South African universities as centres that promote Eurocentric ideologies and, as a result, calls for curriculum transformation and decolonisation were launched. Many universities seem to be struggling to effectively respond by implementing the demands for curriculum transformation and decolonisation. This article reviews existing research to explore the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. Findings revealed that many studies about curriculum transformation and decolonisation do not address the issue of language as an instrumental tool in decolonisation and transforming the curriculum. However, it is evident that language is the strongest pillar of the colonial legacy in the curriculum and other university spaces. Therefore, the article concludes that for the curriculum transformation and decolonisation agenda to succeed, the role of African languages should be clearly defined and put at the centre for coexistence with other dominant languages in higher education.

Keywords: curriculum transformation, decolonisation, African languages, African epistemologies, African identity

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Introduction

In 2011, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, made an announcement and launched a special ministerial project to enforce the development of new language policies at South African universities to accommodate African indigenous languages that were previously sidelined. Nzimande (2011) proposed that South African institutions of higher education had to introduce compulsory African language courses for non-African language-speaking students in order to promote the country's heritage, history, and diversity and to acquire conversational competence. This also aligned with the need to address injustices of the previous apartheid education system by giving equal status to all official languages in higher education. Previously, students could graduate from a South African university without enrolling in any African language course. Therefore, South African universities needed to revise their language policies to accommodate African languages suitable for their contexts (Turner (2012), which resulted in the Ministerial project (Nzimande, 2011). However, despite the progress in the implementation of the compulsory language rule in many universities in South Africa, and existing research on the role of African languages in higher education as courses/modules, it is still not clear how these courses contribute to the decolonisation and transformation agenda in higher education (Mmapane & Omidire, 2018; Turner, 2012).

This systematic review explores studies on curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses/modules as a compulsory rule in higher education. The focus of this article is on exploring existing literature on the progress made since the student movements in 2015 and the subsequent calls for curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. The call for curriculum transformation and decolonisation has been debated for over a decade, and the question about its implementation has become rhetorical in South Africa (Masenya, 2021). Among other issues raised during the student movements of 2015/2016 were claims that the curriculum promotes Eurocentric ideologies and neglects African identity and values in many universities in South Africa (Mabofua, 2020). Many universities are struggling to effectively respond by implementing the demands for curriculum transformation and decolonisation (Hlatshwayo, 2023). On the other hand, some universities have introduced African languages as compulsory courses for all students (Rudwick, 2017). This article argues that compulsory African language courses should be treated as a tool for curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education, not just for basic conversation or communication purposes. We review existing research to explore the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education, and aim to address the following questions:

1. What are research studies saying about curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education?
2. How do researchers understand the role of African language courses as compulsory in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education?

Rationale

The motivation to conduct a systematic review of literature on the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education stems from our classroom experiences as lecturers. We are lecturers in isiZulu conversational, communication, and home language courses at a university in Johannesburg. Before we joined our current institution, we lectured on similar courses at different universities in South Africa. IsiZulu conversational and communication are compulsory African language courses that students must register for and pass to graduate in their undergraduate degrees and postgraduate certificates in education. In school-wide staff meetings, the need for curriculum transformation and decolonisation is always mentioned. This may be because our institution has a long history and colonial legacy. We have decided to pay more attention to this call, drawing on our experiences teaching isiZulu courses and on existing literature to understand the role of African language courses and their impact on curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education.

This research article is arranged in the following sections: context of the topic, an explanation of the conceptual framework used to foreground the study, research methodology, presentation of results,

discussion of the results, conclusion, and limitations. The next section provides context on curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and African languages in South African higher education.

Context

This section provides context, and the connection between curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African languages in South African higher education. This article does not intend to suggest and generalise that this is the case for all South African higher education institutions. However, we draw from existing studies about curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and African languages in South African higher education. Many studies (e.g. Hlatshwayo, 2023; Mabofua, 2020; Masenya, 2021) have shown that South African higher education institutions (SAHEIs) face challenges in implementing curriculum transformation and decolonisation. This call results from student movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, which took place during 2015/2016 (Ntombana et al., 2023). These student movements exposed the long-standing curriculum influenced by colonial and Western ideologies, racial and linguistic inequalities, socioeconomic and many other issues (Ntombana et al., 2023).

Many studies have attempted to unpack the concept of curriculum transformation in South Africa, highlighting the apartheid history and its legacy in SAHEIs' curricula (Muswede, 2017). Studies show that post-apartheid, universities continued with structures and curricula that favoured mostly Afrikaans and White populations (Mzangwa, 2019; Roberts, 2021). According to Kandiko and Kingsbury (2023), many South African universities still use English as the only language of learning, teaching, and assessment, irrespective of their demographic population. According to Mzangwa (2019), universities in South Africa continue to offer Westernised and global knowledge that neglects the learning needs and ideologies of most African students in classrooms. This was also supported by Ntombana et al. (2023), who argued that university curricula were instrumental in engendering Western principles, knowledge, and the colonial agenda.

Studies by Mukaddam (2024) and Roberts (2021) indicated that more than 30 years into democracy, the nature of SAHEIs is characterised by White colonial regimes, which is the reason why the political movements were initiated to raise consciousness about the injustices of the regimes of the institutions (Reddy, 2015). Govender and Naidoo (2023) viewed decolonisation in the South African context as a process of transformation with an intention to centre African realities. According to Mashilo and Govender (2023), the ideological underpinning of decolonisation in SAHEIs is about, but not limited to, recognising African ideologies and ways of knowing.

Mashilo and Govender (2023) argued that because of colonial ideologies embedded in languages used in the curriculum, such as English and Afrikaans, African identity and ideologies were distorted in SAHEIs. Furthermore, these authors explained that African languages have a crucial role in higher education to bring African identity and ideologies into the curriculum and into the centre of university scholarship. Drawing from Mashilo and Govender's point of view, African languages should be afforded similar status to English and Afrikaans as instrumental tools to develop African perspectives. Therefore, students should be exposed to African ideologies in the transformed and decolonised South African university context, not just credits for isiZulu conversation or communication skills. This article proposes the need to explore the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in SAHEIs. At present, African languages are learnt only for conversational and communicative skills. The problem at hand is to what extent these courses promote African ideologies and identities in a transformed and decolonised context.

Conceptual Framework

The study adopted two concepts: Pham et al.'s (2023) concept of curriculum transformation and implementation. According to those authors, curriculum transformation is crucial for improving educational standards. In South Africa, the need for curriculum transformation was spurred by the student movements in 2015/2016, which sought to raise consciousness about curriculum injustices (Vandeyar, 2020). Pham et al. further argued that curriculum transformation and implementation should achieve three things: transformation for access, reparational transformation, and redefining the future beyond transformation.

According to Zembylas (2018), transformation for access in higher education means considering the previously marginalised groups for equal opportunities and access to higher education. Manomano and Nyanhoto (2020) argued that transformation for access also means welcoming the ideologies, values, and voices of previously marginalised groups, for example, some universities had racial and ethnic segregation in the past, so such ideologies require transformation to open access for equal and quality education. On the other hand, Mashwama and Madubela (2024) argued that socioeconomic imbalances are prevalent; as a result, many black students face financial and academic exclusions in many institutions of higher education, therefore, arrangements for students who qualify should be made to increase access to higher education. This type of transformation focuses on inclusion and bringing other perspectives into higher education spaces (Dei, 2016).

Nyoni (2019) suggested that curriculum transformation should be about identifying colonisers' values and ideologies within the curriculum, to bridge the existing gaps. He further suggested that curriculum transformation should empower previously marginalised groups and their voices through active participation in institutional structures and decision-making. It is crucial to note that curriculum transformation in this sense means the need for inclusion of African scholarship, and redistribution of funding and grants to support projects that promote African ideologies to bring change in the higher education landscape. To extend Pham et al.'s (2023) argument, effective implementation of curriculum transformations is crucial for decolonisation and the academic landscape that invites different worldviews and ideologies.

Institutional structures and strategic plans should be aligned with curriculum transformation for a better decolonised university environment; the broad objective for curriculum transformation is to achieve a decolonised university ecosystem (Padayachee et al., 2018). In other words, implementing the changes in curricula should provide impactful outcomes and emancipation (le Grange, 2014). Maringe and Ojo (2017) and Morriera et al. (2020) argued that while preparing for curriculum transformation and decolonised higher education spaces, we should also redefine the future of higher education beyond transformation and its sustainability. This study builds on how African languages can be instrumental in curriculum transformation and decolonisation of education in South African universities.

Methodology

The study used a systematic review as a research instrument to explore how researchers understand curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses as a compulsory rule in South African higher education. Snyder (2019) explained that a systematic review can be used as a research instrument to investigate the existing literature. This systematic review aimed to develop a conceptual understanding from published scholarly work on the notion of curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses as a compulsory rule in South African higher education.

Identification of Scholarly Sources

This study identified 15 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2024. The 15-year period allowed us to explore the scholars' understanding of transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses in higher education before, during, and post students' movements. Literature reviewed clarifies that transformation and decolonisation arguments existed long before the student movements in 2015 and 2016. In fact, some universities had already introduced African languages as a compulsory requirement for students before the student movements started. Our criteria for identifying journal articles included the focus of the journal article, accreditation by the Department of Higher Education and Training, and the context in which the study was conducted, focusing on South Africa. We used research databases such as EBSCOHOST, Google Scholar, and AJOL to search for published research articles on the topic. We used keywords like "transformation in higher education," "decolonisation in higher education," and "the role of African languages in higher education" to search for relevant research articles. To ensure trustworthiness, only PDFs with full citations were downloaded to be analysed for this research.

For data management, we created a spreadsheet to record each journal article's information, namely, title, year of publication, focus (higher education), and the context in which the study was conducted. This process is like profiling participants in qualitative research (Dahal et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

We adopted a qualitative analysis approach. The first step was to read each article and evaluate its relevance in terms of focus and year of publication. The second step was to create a list of the relevant research articles according to this study's key research concepts: curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African languages compulsory courses in higher education. The final step was summarising the findings and creating categories thematically.

Results

The following sections summarise relevant literature on the themes of curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses as a compulsory rule in higher education.

Scholarly Literature on Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education

A study by Ramrathan (2016) on shifting higher education transformation into curriculum spaces revealed that this activity is a significant move aiming to redress social injustice that exists in the current curriculum. According to that author, demographic changes in higher education classrooms, revealing an increase in African students, require profound transformation and curriculum intellectualism. Drawing from Ramrathan's argument, the next wave of curriculum transformation in higher education would be instrumental if it included debates on the intellectualisation of African languages as fundamental tools in curriculum transformation.

Hall and Smyth (2016) wrote about dismantling the curriculum in higher education, arguing that understanding the relationship between the university and society is crucial in curriculum transformation. Among the findings, their study revealed the importance of inclusion and representation of all the societal voices in the university curriculum. These authors suggested that curriculum principles should be rooted in the newly defined culture that represents everyone. Therefore, in this article, we argue that if language forms part of culture, and a way of defining speakers of that language, African languages should be recognised as part of the curriculum where African students have been granted physical access.

A study by Shay (2016) revealed that SAHEIs follow academic curricula that do not respond to students' real-life experiences in their contexts. According to that author, #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, violent clashes, and protests were clear indications of the students' desire for education that is rooted in African discourse and considers their historical backgrounds. Shay suggested that curriculum transformation would lead to social transformation in higher learning institutions, ultimately resulting in the decolonisation of the students' minds. That author's study found a need for curriculum transformation that accommodates African epistemologies within university curricula. It is thus unclear how SAHEIs plan to include African epistemologies and voices in institutional strategic goals, and their sustainability. However, research shows that there is still a gap in terms of including African languages and defining their role in all universities' prominent activities.

In an article entitled "Being Black in South African Higher Education," Hlatshwayo (2023) argued that South African higher education seems to grapple to interpret the 2015/2016 student movements that called for curriculum transformation and decolonisation. According to that author, SAHEIs continue to offer epistemic violence in the academy through their curriculum, alienating and marginalising students and, even today, South African universities continue to struggle to manage the issue of curriculum transformation and decolonisation. We are asking ourselves, is it because the role of African languages has been neglected in all these debates? Is it because English and Afrikaans have been at the centre of these debates as the primary tools that were used to colonise and marginalise African minds.

A study by Athiemoalam and Vermaak (2021) in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, revealed that even though higher education classrooms are multilingual, English and Afrikaans are still dominant in university curricula. According to those authors, university curricula continue to subject African students to either English or Afrikaans as the language of teaching, learning, and assessment, and lecturers continue to implement the same curricula and strategies even though classroom demographics have changed. They further noted that the current situation in many universities in South Africa is that although there is access

to higher education for all, many African students are still disadvantaged in the education system and curricula that are taught in English and Afrikaans.

Another study by Pham et al. (2023) indicated that university curricula and learning spaces are used as tools to colonise students' minds intentionally and indirectly, therefore, curriculum transformation should also be intentional about addressing the existing gaps. According to those authors, the success of curriculum transformation depends on the lecturers' preparedness and professional development to plan and implement a new curriculum that addresses the existing damages of the mind, imbalances, and injustices. Their study further suggests that university lecturers may need to change how they think, and their beliefs about complex issues enacted in the curriculum including teaching methods, language, and assessment.

Scholarly Literature on Decolonisation in Higher Education

Stein and Andreotti (2016) conducted a study on decolonisation in higher education and found that the central role of universities is social reproduction and knowledge generation. Those authors also found that many universities have marginalised African voices, philosophies, theories, and epistemologies in social reproduction and knowledge generation. Their study argued that many universities suppressed African voices and produced colonised professionals and practitioners who are holding important positions today across the globe. The big question is, how can universities be instrumental in decolonising the minds of society? Is it through introducing African language compulsory courses that merely focus on conversation and communication skills?

A study conducted by Fomunyam (2017) on decolonising the future in the untransformed present in South African higher education revealed that decolonisation should go beyond institutional policies stored in the university's shelves as a tick box activity. According to that author, decolonisation activities should be seen in the classrooms and university environments for practice. This argument has brought us to the most important question: "Is the introduction of African languages as compulsory courses in South African universities just a tick box?" There is a need for a study that explores the impact of these courses on curriculum transformation and the decolonisation agenda. While English and Afrikaans hegemony still prevails as languages of learning, teaching, and assessment across the disciplines, African languages are only offered the opportunity to be studied as conversational or communication modules.

Another article by Chikoko (2021) revealed that research studies dwell on decolonising university programmes, qualifications, and curricula in isolation. According to that author, the system of decolonising university sections individually and in isolation will not lead to the effective transformation and reform needed. There will be no effective change, and colonial pillars will remain intact. The debates around curriculum transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education has caught the attention of many scholars; we ask ourselves if the colonial pillars that remain intact include English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages of teaching, learning, and assessment in many universities even today. If English and Afrikaans are not home languages for many higher education students, then many universities have not transformed and decolonised to societal expectations.

On the other hand, Chikoko (2016) argued that there is a need to Africanise the higher education curricula and to establish the role of African scholarship in the university curricula. According to that author, key components in Africanising the curricula are physical and epistemological access, globalisation, and internationalisation. Many scholars, including Chikoko have been part of the heated debate on Africanisation of curriculum, transformation, and decolonisation. However, the role of African languages in an Africanised, transformed, and decolonised curriculum is not acknowledged. Therefore, the question: "If English and Afrikaans are colonial languages, how do we empower African languages to decolonise the universities and dethrone these colonial languages?" Some will think dethroning means to do away with English and Afrikaans, but no—it means establishing the coexistence of all the languages in higher education for equal epistemological access.

Govender and Naidoo (2023) explored decolonial insights for transforming the higher education curriculum in South Africa. Their study found that changing attitudes and ownership by staff is a key challenge in implementing a decolonised curriculum. This study also revealed that many university staff are unprepared to embrace African students through a decolonised curriculum and inclusive epistemologies. Drawing on these findings, it is still unclear how students are expected to change their

attitudes and embrace one another when university staff themselves do not have this deep conversation of including African epistemologies through curricula and courses. Does this mean the decoloniality agenda is left in the hands of African languages lecturers through the compulsory courses?

Scholarly Literature on the Role of African Language Courses as a Compulsory Rule in Higher Education

Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) explored African Languages, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the transformation of the humanities and social sciences in higher education. Their study reported that universities need to develop language policies to support Indigenous languages for scientific and scholarly discourse, and that universities need to equip and harness Indigenous languages and local knowledge systems. Drawing from Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa's argument, the role of African languages in higher education should go beyond being taught as a compulsory course for conversation and communication; it should be used as a language of teaching, learning, and research. If African languages' role is clarified and implemented like other colonial languages, that would be instrumental in the curriculum transformation and decolonisation agenda.

A study by Lumadi (2021) on linguistic transformation in higher education revealed that several linguistic injustices need to be addressed in higher education curricula. According to that author, universities are implicated in the historical injustices and marginalisation of African students through curricula that continue to promote Eurocentric ideologies. That study further showed that previous and current university language policy implementation created racial segregation and promotes Eurocentric epistemologies and that linguistic transformation and practical implementation are required for decolonisation to happen. In another study, Mkhize (2020) argued that while there have been known English- and Afrikaans-speaking universities in South Africa, there has never been a university that uses an African Indigenous language as a language of teaching and learning, even though the universities that were previously known for only black African students.

Additionally, Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025) conducted a study exploring the integration of Indigenous knowledge (IK) in the Environmental Education module at the University of South Africa. The study revealed that IK is a powerful tool through which the curriculum in higher education can be decolonised to ensure its relevance to indigenous students and expose non-Indigenous students to other forms of knowledge and perspectives. However, results showed that IK was almost absent during lectures and was later introduced in one of the tutorials through the glossary of terms translated into African languages. According to those authors, lecturers seem to understand that translating key terms into African languages during some of the tutorials was part of decolonising the curriculum.

Another study by de Vos and Riedel (2023) revealed that African languages have a significant role in decolonising and transforming the curriculum. According to those authors, introducing African languages as the language of learning, teaching, and assessment would bring epistemological access and balance multiple voices in the curriculum. They further stated that there is a lively academic debate in South Africa about the role of African languages and linguistic issues in decolonisation. Among other issues is undermining African languages and questioning their legitimacy to knowledge access and quality knowledge production compared to English as a glorified global language. In contrast, many developed countries invest in Indigenous languages as instruments for knowledge discovery and production. We argue that there is a need to expedite the implementation of African languages as languages of learning, teaching, and assessment in higher education to avoid another delay that causes alienation of African students and their voices in the curriculum and university spaces.

Mashilo and Govender (2023) investigated African identity and curriculum transformation at universities in South Africa. Their study revealed that African languages contain African identity, therefore, they should be placed at the centre of the decolonisation project. According to those authors, defining African identity in university curricula and in decolonisation does not mean a total negation of Western ideas and epistemologies, but foregrounding African identity, culture, and epistemologies embedded in African languages as part of a global economy and scholarship. Drawing on the above arguments, it is crucial to involve university stakeholders in the decolonisation agenda, not just students through

compulsory African language courses that do not promote African identity and ideologies in the global scholarship.

Discussion

The previous studies show that curriculum transformation and decolonisation are not new subjects in South African higher education. It is crucial to note that since 2015, when these student movements began, many scholars have been debating and calling for curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. Many studies have revealed that South African university curricula promote Eurocentric ideologies and epistemologies.

These studies have revealed that university curricula and spaces created racial, cultural, and epistemological segregations using colonial languages that marginalised Black students (Lumadi, 2021). Given that colonial languages created so much segregation and marginalisation for Black people, why do universities shy away from acknowledging the role of African languages in addressing the injustices of the past? If colonial languages were used to promote Western ideologies, would putting African languages in coexistence with other languages in the university curriculum not achieve decolonisation? The goal is not to dethrone English and Afrikaans, but to empower African languages and students to have equal linguistic opportunities. In that sense, students would choose the languages of learning, teaching, assessment, and research, based on their linguistic proficiency.

Additionally, Mkhize (2020) argued that while there have been English- and Afrikaans-speaking universities in South Africa, Indigenous African languages continue to struggle as languages of teaching and learning—even in the universities previously for only Black African students. This was supported by Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025), whose study highlighted that African Indigenous knowledge was almost absent during lectures and only later introduced in a tutorial through the glossary of terms translated into African languages.

Other studies revealed that the Eurocentric curriculum alienated African identity (Mashilo & Govender, 2023). This is about the university curriculum not representing the identities and ideologies of African societies. Black students have to forget who they are and adopt a Western identity to fit in and be accepted. On the other hand, White students enjoy the privilege of studying in their native language in a curriculum that totally makes sense to them. Drawing on Mashilo and Govender's (2023) argument, for curriculum transformation and decolonisation to take place, African identity and epistemologies should be brought in to coexist alongside Eurocentrism. Our argument is that identity and language are intertwined; therefore, African languages have an important role in curriculum transformation and decolonisation. Furthermore, as part of decolonisation, universities should invest in the intellectualisation of African languages given that they were previously marginalised. Our stance is that without positioning African languages for learning, teaching, assessment, and research across the disciplines on curriculum transformation and decolonisation debates, the debate is fruitless.

Drawing from the study conducted by Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014), the delay in policy implementation and using African languages as languages of learning, teaching, assessment, and research is delaying curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. It has been more than 10 years since some universities developed language policies. However, those policies have only delivered the introduction of African language conversational and communication courses that do not directly dismantle the colonial pillars in these universities. We believe that the conversation we should be having is how we intellectualise African languages as instrumental tools to dismantle Eurocentric ideologies in the curriculum and decolonise the colonial university system. Research shows that there is a lack of empirical evidence on how African language conversational and communication courses decolonise the Eurocentric ideologies at universities.

Conclusion

Research studies conducted on curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education show that much still needs to be done to dismantle the colonial legacy and to bring transformation to the higher education landscape. Studies revealed that colonial languages were at the centre of Westernising the curriculum, and remain the core pillar promoting Western epistemologies. Therefore, centring African languages would promote Africanisation of the curricula. Although curriculum transformation and decolonisation have been debated over decades, and student movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall have applied more pressure, there is slow progress in terms of using African languages for learning, teaching, assessment, and research across the disciplines in higher education.

While studies have highlighted the role and importance of African languages as a tool to transform and decolonise higher education, African languages continue to be taught as separate, compulsory conversation and communication courses. In contrast, the language in the curriculum reflects Eurocentric ideologies. Research shows that African languages are minimally integrated in content courses, where only glossary terms are used in selected tutorials. This study recommends that empirical research should be done to explore the role of compulsory African Indigenous language courses on decolonisation and curriculum transformation in higher education. Also, the implementation of university language policies and curricula needs to be monitored and evaluated for progress in curriculum transformation and decolonisation.

Limitations

This study was limited to the research studies on African Indigenous languages' role in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. Empirical research should be conducted to further explore the use of African Indigenous languages for the transformation and decolonisation of curricula in different universities.

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Multilingual Pedagogies as an Enabler in Creating and Fostering Learner Engagement in English Second Language Literature Classrooms⁷

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Abstract

Research on multilingual pedagogies in English Second Language (ESL) classrooms is gaining momentum globally and in South Africa. However, more studies focus on the higher education context, universities in particular. Basic education and technical and vocational education and training are mostly ignored. This study explored translanguaging and code-switching as pedagogies of choice for ESL teachers, particularly in teaching literature. Literature teaching has been challenging ESL teachers for decades. The study sought to explore the use of translanguaging and code-switching as a relevant response in ESL literature teaching classrooms. It was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to explore the teachers' experiences of using these multilingual pedagogies. This qualitative case study employed ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy as an epistemic lens because it grounds pedagogy in African philosophy and humanity, and because it sought to understand the teachers' premises in using these pedagogies in the context of South Africa. Four high school ESL teachers were purposively sampled and interviewed. Each teacher was observed teaching a lesson based on prescribed literature for Grades 10–12. In thematically analysing data, the findings were that translanguaging and code-switching enhance learner engagement and positively impact formal and informal assessments. There was also a view that school management typically discourages using such pedagogies out of fear that learners may lose a good grasp of English. Therefore, multilingual pedagogies should be intellectually infused in planning literature lessons. Furthermore, teacher training and language policies should be diversified to embrace the multilingual realities within the ESL classrooms. There is also a need for further research on how the use of multilingual pedagogies impacts other language skills such as reading and writing.

Keywords: multilingualism, multilingual pedagogies, code-switching, translanguaging, literature, English second language

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Introduction and Background

Internationally and in South Africa, multilingualism is perceived as a resource and not a barrier to learning and teaching, especially in English second language (ESL) classrooms (Baker, 2011; Kwon et al., 2025; Ngubane & Ntombela, 2024; Rezaee et al., 2025; Zano & Mpiti, 2025). South African second language classrooms are largely multilingual due to the country's multilingual nature (Makalela, 2018). The country has 11 official spoken languages and a South African sign language. Learners in the ESL classrooms bring the wealth of their mother tongue and other official languages into the classroom. The classrooms' multilingual nature is also tied to the rich and diverse cultures that learners bring into the classroom (Makalela, 2015, 2018). Initially, multilingualism was perceived as a threat in the ESL classrooms, but now it is clear that multilingualism is a resource (Burton, 2025; Zondi & Mncube, 2024). In such classrooms, teachers must often navigate the complexity of teaching literature in English to second language speakers. Multilingualism is therefore an important resource in teaching literature in the linguistically and culturally diverse South Africa.

In South African high schools, literature includes novels, drama or plays, short stories and poetry (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). These components are embedded into the English subject or curriculum. Teaching literature in English to such a diverse group of learners can provide an opportunity and a challenge for ESL teachers (Hussein et al., 2021). Literature is known to be resourceful in developing learners' creative thinking skills, writing skills, vocabulary, social awareness, and shaping worldviews, among others. However, second language learners of the English language commonly struggle with understanding literature and seeing its usefulness in the curriculum (Hossain, 2024; Rai, 2025). This has brought some challenges for teachers in the ESL context. Learners typically lack the motivation to study extensively, and only read literature for assessment or examination purposes. This defeats the purpose of the inclusion of literature in the ESL classroom.

Hussein (2025) and Rai (2025) emphasised that integrating literature in the ESL classroom is essential and presented a justification. However, the comprehension, analysis, and vocabulary of literary texts such as novels, poetry, drama, and short stories have been challenging for most ESL teachers (Taye, 2025). Therefore, multilingual pedagogies offer a reasonable and conducive space for learners to learn literature using languages they understand better. Higher education institutions have embraced multilingualism and translanguaging as pedagogy (Madiba, 2014; Makalela, 2014, 2016; Ngubane, 2025). However, there is still a gap in the use of and clear policies on how multilingual pedagogies are used, and how they can be used in high schools in South Africa. This paper looks at how ESL teachers in Pinetown District high schools use code-switching and translanguaging as a resource to enhance learner engagement and sound understanding of literature in their classrooms.

Learner engagement then becomes a central issue in teaching literature in multilingual classrooms. Learner engagement is a broad phenomenon but, in this paper, it refers to curriculum structuring and pedagogies that are used in the classroom to ensure that there is active interaction in the learning environment (Bender, 2017). Davies et al. (2018) emphasised that learner engagement enhances the learning experience, which may be inclusive of physical and intellectual activities.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Relevance of the Language in Education Policy and Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education

South African schools are linguistically and culturally diverse. However, monolingualism and the exclusion of some languages have been a part of its history for decades. The dawn of democratic South Africa aimed to bring a change through the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP; Department of Education [DoE], 1997),

which both promoted multilingualism and cultural diversity in society and schools. LiEP advocated that learning more than one language should be accepted as practice and principle in South African schools. This policy further asserted that learners benefit intellectually and emotionally from the bilingual education system. The main aims of LiEP are to promote complete involvement in society and economy through access to education, to establish additive bilingualism as an approach to language in education, to promote and develop all the official languages, to support the teaching and learning of all other languages needed by learners in the Republic of South Africa, and to do away with disadvantages brought by the gaps between home languages and languages of learning and teaching (DoE, 1997). August-Mowers' (2025) critique was that practitioners at basic and higher education levels have not intentionally and sufficiently implemented the aims of the LiEP. Furthermore, this scholar argued that the current intentional implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTBBE) is a gateway for schools to embrace diverse languages in order to eventually deal with language alienation and enforce social justice and equity. Thus, teachers in basic education must ensure that multilingual practices are not just on paper but a reality in the classroom given that the policies provide these opportunities. MTBBE does not necessarily include teaching English as a subject, but using more than one language as a resource (Makalela, 2015) would be a win for language teachers because these would be fluidly used in the classroom; translanguaging and code-switching would be intentionally used and embraced in the classroom.

Multilingualism as a Resource in the ESL Classroom

Heugh (2015) posited that multilingual pedagogies are a response to the traditionally monolingual and Eurocentric approaches of teaching English. The traditional English teaching methods are teacher-centred, monolingual, and not always responsive to diversity within the ESL classrooms. Matiso (2023) and Rai (2025) posited that using multilingual pedagogies in the classroom improves ESL learners' awareness of language structures as they use multilingual repertoires to compare and contrast ideas. This becomes a source and a strength for language development. Using languages they understand better improves motivation, communicative competence, and engagement in the classroom.

Multilingual pedagogies present a necessary shift because they uphold and consider the learners' language repertoires as assets and not threats in the ESL classroom (Hossain, 2024; Makalela, 2016; Maseko & Mkhize, 2021; Mijima & Makalela, 2016). Failure to use pedagogies that learners better understand, results in learners failing to engage in literature classrooms. Farah Mahmood et al. (2024), Rai (2025), and Zondi and Mbatha (2024) argued that the effective use of pedagogies such as code-switching and translanguaging pedagogy in ESL literature classrooms enhances learner engagement, deeper understanding, cultural awareness, tolerance, and a positive classroom culture. Motteram and Dawson (2025) confirmed that there is growth in multilingualism within the ESL classroom across the globe. In particular, the multilingual literacies and biliteracy aim to enhance inclusion and cater for learners' linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds.

For Paran (2006), literature is helpful for language learning, cultural expression, and identity in ESL contexts. However, monolingual linguistic approaches stifle literature engagement in learning environments where learners struggle to relate to English texts due to limited proficiency or cultural awareness (Banda, 2018). Multilingual pedagogies such as translanguaging and code-switching become an enabler in bridging this gap (García & Wei, 2014; Lee, 2025; Nguyen, 2025). Lee (2025) and Nguyen (2025) specifically distinguished between translanguaging and code-switching. These multilingual pedagogies enhance or develop learners' access, interpretation, and emotional connection with literary texts, thus

enhancing learner engagement and critical reasoning. I argue for the integrated use of multilingual pedagogies, blending the learner-centred, teacher-centred, learning-centred, and content-centred. In the ESL literature classroom, code-switching can be used initially as a teacher-centred pedagogy. Translanguaging is mostly learner-centred, which is more impactful.

Code-Switching as an Enabler in the ESL Classroom

Code-switching is a natural phenomenon in classrooms where learners and teachers speak fluidly, moving within two or more languages or dialects within one conversation or discussion (Naseer & Ahmed, 2025; Ramaila, 2025). Therefore, it is a phenomenon that naturally occurs in the diverse and multilingual South African classrooms. However, it is mainly perceived as a foreign element in the English classroom (Zondi & Mncube, 2024), where it yields more advantages. Some perceive it as a resource in the classroom, while others perceive it as laziness and a hindrance to linguistic and communicative competence (Saligumba & Barcelona, 2023). Contrary to these views, it is effective in enhancing language learning and communicative competence, and a trusted approach in developing learners' creative thinking and engagement (Naseer & Ahmed, 2025). Jabbar (2025) and Seabela and Ncanywa (2024) viewed code-switching as a scaffold, a tool to enhance learner understanding, and a strength in building a connection between the mother tongue and the target language. It further assists in lessening learner anxiety, and it assists teachers in simplifying complex concepts and creating a supportive learning environment. Some scholars argue that code-switching is not without disadvantages. It can promote overreliance on languages other than English; it may be challenging to manage the classroom with buzzing sounds of different languages, and some teachers have a negative perception, saying it is a waste of time and has no positive impact on assessments and examinations (Ramaila, 2025).

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Resource in the ESL Classroom

Cen Williams coined the term translanguaging from the Welsh term *trawsieithu*, referring to the pedagogical practice of using Welsh and English (García & Wei, 2014). It differs slightly from code-switching because it views languages as internally or inherently multilingual and multimodal, as García & Wei (2014) and Li (2022) asserted. Furthermore, translanguaging advocates for integrating various languages and diverse meaning-making tools in a dynamic teaching and learning environment. Therefore, it is not like code-switching, which clearly shows the separation of codes; translanguaging presents languages as a unified linguistic repertoire (Li, 2017, 2022). Cenoz and Gorter (2020) and Ngubane (2025) further emphasised that translanguaging pedagogy enhances learner comprehension and engagement during class discussions. It transcends linguistic boundaries and creates an environment where learners respond through their linguistic repertoire to communicate while bridging the gap between various languages and cultures (Javaid et al., 2025). For Cenoz and Gorter (2020) and García and Wei (2014), as a pedagogy, translanguaging should be used as an intentional and strategic tool to enhance critical thinking, vocabulary development, linguistic tolerance, and awareness of diverse linguistic repertoires. According to Sharmin (2025), the fluid use of languages in the ESL classroom develops vocabulary, expression, confidence, and communicative competence. Translanguaging effectively can also lessen anxiety and improve learner engagement with the content and expressing themselves in the target language. In the ESL classroom, translanguaging serves as a linguistic resource that enables the achievement of teaching objectives and learning outcomes (Nguyen & Tran, 2025).

Despite these linguistic benefits, translanguaging still faces resistance from some teachers and other stakeholders (García & Lin, 2017). Some teachers are sceptical because learners might develop overdependence on translanguaging, which may hamper linguistic competence in English. For many other teachers, however, translanguaging is a valuable resource in the ESL classroom because it enhances comprehension and reduces linguistic and affective barriers such as anxiety and fear of failure (Nguyen & Tran, 2025).

Ubuntu Translanguaging Pedagogy as an Epistemic Lens

This paper used ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy as an epistemic lens. This theoretical stance is based on the philosophy of ubuntu, an African concept from the Nguni tribes. It is commonly expressed with the Nguni saying “*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” loosely translated as “I am because you are” (Letseka, 2012; Makalela, 2016, 2018). Ubuntu emphasises the values of interdependence, solidarity, community life, and compassion. Ubuntu pedagogy is a lens deeply embedded in this understanding of humanity and community life (Choane, 2025). This expression, therefore, challenges the individualistic and Western approach to life and understanding of language. In the context of South African classrooms, the ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy brings in a sense of unity, mutual respect, and tolerance, as well as values of sociocultural and linguistic realities within the classroom. This brings a shift from one language being superior and others being inferior. Instead, language dependence is emphasised. This means that in the multilingual classroom, one language is incomplete without the other languages, and they are fluidly used without being named or labelled (Makalela, 2016; Sefotho, 2022). The following conceptual equation better expresses how this lens is conceptualised in this paper:

Ubuntu + Translanguaging + Pedagogy = Ubuntu Translanguaging Pedagogy

Ubuntu pedagogy fits well with multilingual approaches, promoting inclusivity and communicative and culturally appreciative learning environments (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This paper explores ubuntu pedagogy as a lens through which ESL multilingual classrooms can be perceived in South Africa. In the classroom context, ubuntu pedagogy can be seen as a pedagogical approach that promotes unity, tolerance, and community rather than individualism and competing with others (Choane, 2025). The emphasis on interconnectedness in ubuntu aligns closely with multilingual pedagogical practices, particularly translanguaging and code-switching, emphasising that language use is a fluid, dynamic, and socially constructed process (Garcia & Lin, 2017). Learners should be encouraged to tap into their linguistic repertoires in multilingual classrooms for easy knowledge construction and reconstruction access. Therefore, ubuntu and ubuntu translanguaging come into play as they advocate for collaborative meaning-making and mutual respect, among others (Maphalala, 2017; Ngubane, 2025). This pedagogy is relevant to the South African ESL classroom context, where monolingualism usually takes precedence, neglecting the multilingual realities and the diversity of the learners.

Methodology

This qualitative case study sampled four teachers from four neighbouring schools in Pinetown District, Durban. The interpretivist paradigm was used as a lens, and the ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy as a theoretical stance. A small sample of ESL teachers was conveniently sampled due to their proximity to the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018). These schools in the same district serve communities with similar sociocultural and economic factors. The chosen schools were in the north of Durban, with many learners speaking isiZulu and some isiXhosa, but were fluent in isiZulu. Two teachers were teaching Grades 10–12, and the other two were only teaching Grades 11 and 12.

Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used to generate qualitative data. The data were thematically analysed to deduce themes. Data coding was done manually without the use of any software. The researcher followed the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse themes. All four teachers were interviewed using the interview schedule with 11 questions; follow-up questions were also asked. All four teachers were also observed in Grades 10 and 11, one observation per teacher. Grade 12 classes were intentionally not observed to avoid disturbance as the principals had requested during the authorisation or permission period.

The university and the provincial department granted permission to do the study. The study was explained to the participants, who were informed of ethical processes before signing the consent forms

(Edwards & Holland, 2013). The researcher knew the participants because they worked in the same district, which may have presented a response bias. To minimise bias, the researcher explained that the process upholds anonymity and confidentiality and that they could withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Furthermore, observations assisted the researcher in triangulating data and seeing differences and similarities in semi-structured interview data and classroom observations.

Discussion of Findings

The data presented and discussed in this section were drawn from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The recordings from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. The observation sheet was used to record observations and analysis. This section presents the occurrences in the observed lessons and verbatim transcriptions under relevant themes. All four teachers were interviewed and observed. Only Grade 10 and 11 classes were observed; Grade 12 was intentionally excluded as per the agreement with the teachers and the principals. The four teachers were observed teaching short stories and poetry. The study aimed to explore the teachers' experiences of multilingual pedagogies in teaching literature to ESL high school learners. The participants taught Grades 10–12 Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal. The key themes that emerged from the interview and observation data include: the use of multilingual pedagogies to enhance learner engagement, the use of multilingual pedagogies and their perceived effect on performance in assessments, multilingual pedagogies help in creating a conducive classroom environment, and policy implications. The study sought to respond to two research questions:

- What are the ESL high school teachers' experiences of multilingual pedagogies in teaching literature to second language learners?
- How do ESL high school teachers use multilingual pedagogies to develop learner engagement in literature classrooms?

The Use of Multilingual Pedagogies to Enhance Learner Engagement

You can only notice that the learners need guidance or clarification if you know their abilities better. Good teachers who know and understand their learners can detect confusion from physical gestures such as withdrawal of the body and facial expressions, which create quiet and boring classrooms. Literature teachers ideally should be interactive and engaging given that literature is about life in general. The findings reveal that English-only classrooms may limit engagement, but multilingual pedagogies create an environment that allows learners to share their thoughts (Rajendram, 2023). Rai (2025) also emphasised that multilingual pedagogies enhance learner engagement by efficiently communicating about their experiences and worldviews (Ramaila, 2025).

Teacher A: You notice by the learners' facial expressions and responses to specific questions you ask that there may be a lack of understanding. Therefore, you have to adjust to that while in the classroom. What works is asking them questions so that they engage. If I strictly ask them to speak in English, only a few would respond to literature discussions.

Teacher C: Ha ha ha, [laughing] the learners; they do not understand because you can see your learners if they do not understand, and you know your classes again. So it just happens; I know learners will not understand this, so let me explain in isiZulu, and then it becomes better.

Teacher D: It works, but my problem sometimes is that it causes the class to be chaotic. I like order in my classroom. I feel like it works better in some classes but not in all classes.

Notably, teachers have to know the strengths and weaknesses of their learners. This quality assists the teacher in probing them to engage. It also assists in managing the classroom and minimising misbehaviour. It is a reality that most learners are passive and sometimes uncontrollable because the lesson does not make sense to them (Pang & Cai, 2023). Teacher B believed that multilingual pedagogies may enhance learner engagement but could cause chaos in the classroom if it is overused. The concern about chaos was observed in Teacher A's class when she was teaching the short story *Her Three Days* in Grade 10. She asked learners to discuss the theme of patriarchy regarding Noumbe's suffering from Mustapha's way of life. There was a heated debate, and the teacher had to come in and bring them to order. However, the learners seemed to enjoy the discussion, and they were able to deduce themes from the discussion eventually. The discussion took up 15 to 20 minutes of the lesson. Without knowing or realising it, the teacher unknowingly practised ubuntu philosophy, where learners negotiated meaning through sensible discussions alluding to culture, religion, unity, mutual respect, and others (Maphalala, 2017). This was ubuntu translanguaging at play and, as Sharmin (2025) asserted, real-life engagements and language learning are intertwined and important in translanguaging because an inclusive and safe environment is created. Notably, during the discussion of emerging themes, the teacher alluded to how these may be asked in the assessments and how learners would be expected to respond. So, assessment insights were integrated during discussions.

The Use of Multilingual Pedagogies and Their Perceived Effect on Performance in Assessments

There were various views on the contributory factors of multilingual pedagogies on formal and informal assessments. These were perceptions and experiences from the teachers. There was no follow-up or checking of the actual performance of learners. The researcher only wanted to understand their perspectives and the rationale. Teachers must work towards improving learner performance in their daily practices. The participants raised the importance of this performance issue during the interview process. Everyone agreed that any professional teacher should work towards improving learner performance while striving for quality education. Teacher B views that the use of multilingual pedagogies had a negative impact on assessments:

The issue is that they may enjoy using isiZulu or isiXhosa, but when it comes to tasks, they fail dismally because there is no code-switching or translanguaging there. They have to interpret and analyse the question without the teacher's or peers' presence; when they cannot, they fail the examination because of this code-switching.

Teacher B is of the view that the use of multilingual pedagogies creates dependence on peers or teachers. He believes that is why learners fail assessments. He believes that code-switching, in particular, did not assist much with written tasks because the learners needed help understanding and answering the set questions. The views of the other participants, Teachers A, C, and D, differed. It is generally believed that the classroom environment created during teaching and discussions leads to better understanding, which funnels to better expression and analysis when responding to written questions.

Teacher D: The first thing is for them [learners] to understand whatever concepts you teach. Once they know, then they can try to answer. So they are most likely to respond if they understand me using some isiZulu or code-switching to isiZulu. In that way, when they answer correctly, they will pass, which benefits them. If your learners pass, you know you have good or better results as a teacher.

Teacher C: Sometimes, it is what you want to see happen; sometimes, it is not, because you know when the question paper comes, and the learner has to answer it. When you were teaching that part, they understood, and when the question came, they wished

it would be code-switched again, but now, exam time does not allow that. So sometimes it works, sometimes it does not work.

Teacher A: More especially those who are struggling, they benefit when I switch between languages. It helps me when I am teaching because it is hard to leave the class knowing very well that the kids you teach are passive. Even more helpful is allowing them to read the poem or drama and interpret it in their own words during small group discussions. I have seen that this has a positive ripple effect on assessments.

Teacher A further explained that multilingual pedagogies likely improved learner performance in her literature classes. Learners are motivated and engage with the text and other learners. This is noted by Naseer and Ahmed (2025) as an advantage of using multilingual pedagogies in the classroom:

My Grade 10 learners are more motivated to discuss and express ideas, even in their performance in literature tasks and exams. It positively affects the learners' performance; if they understand the content, they can reproduce it when writing formal or informal assessments. . . . For informal assessment, if you are code-switching, it is easier for the learners to participate in the lesson actively. Therefore, if you ask questions, they will quickly respond to you because they understand what you are talking about.

Jabbar (2025) revealed that multilingual pedagogies assist teachers in scaffolding and explaining complex concepts; if the complex concepts are understood during the lesson, the assessment will be easy for the learners. Matiso (2023) and Rai (2025) also emphasised that multilingual pedagogies enhance better comprehension of the target language and the texts. The arguments differed when it came to the question of learner performance enhancement. When considering their experience, some participants were convinced that code-switching and translanguaging improved the learners' performance because they eradicated many barriers to learning. At the same time, some participants did not deny the positive effects of code-switching but were adamant that it did not necessarily assist the learners in improving their results. Algarin-Ruiz (2014) argued that code-switching improves learner performance, especially on literary tasks. One may conclude by stating that the effect of code-switching on learner performance depends on how it is used and how much of it is used in the English as Foreign Language classroom. Shinga and Pillay (2021) revealed that code-switching had no adverse effect on second language proficiency and did not threaten learners' language development. When teachers were asked about how the subject advisors and school management felt about the use of multilingual pedagogies, they shared similar sentiments:

Teacher B: Fortunately for me, I am a department head and have no problem. However, our subject advisor is totally against it, and it is always emphasised during workshops. There is a sense that teachers use isiZulu or isiXhosa because they do not know English well. Also, there is a worry that learners will fail assessments.

Teacher C: My SMT [school management team] is against English teachers using languages other than English. Which is crazy because the content subject teachers code-switch a lot, and learners use this translanguaging every day. At least for us, it is only when we see the need, especially in teaching literature.

The education officials and school management teams still seem to be against multilingual pedagogies in the English classroom. However, the teachers use these pedagogies because they see their effectiveness, especially in literature classrooms. English is a medium of instruction for content subjects, but those teachers understand that using the mother tongue to explain concepts would lessen anxiety and

improve comprehension (Nguyen & Tran, 2025). The English subject classrooms should not be an exception, especially literature classes. However, these pedagogies should be used sparingly and not overused so that learners still master the proficiency in the target language. These teachers understand that the language of power should be used to develop the inherent languages (Wang et al., 2025).

Multilingual Pedagogies Help in Creating a Conducive Classroom Environment

Three of the four participants felt that using a multilingual pedagogy or pedagogies was helpful in creating an environment where learners could easily share ideas and express their feelings with the teacher or amongst themselves. This echoes the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS; DBE, 2011), which emphasises that language is aimed at providing learners with rich and deeply rooted ideas that they can use to shape their worldviews and social realities. This implies that there should be co-creation of knowledge in multilingual classrooms, and this should not be constrained to a specific language.

Teacher A: More especially those who are struggling, they benefit when I switch between languages. It helps me when I am teaching because it is hard to leave the class knowing very well that the kids you teach are passive. Even more helpful is allowing them to read the poem or drama and interpret it in their own words during small group discussions.

Jabbar (2025) believed that code-switching is an asset in the ESL classroom and should not be seen as a sign of deficiency. The multilingual teacher can create a conducive environment for multilingual learners and enhance the language being learnt. The multilingual status of the teacher and the learner allows for a conducive teaching and learning environment. The teacher will know when there are gaps and fill them with the minimal use of isiZulu.

During the teaching of a Grade 11 poem, "Cattle in the rain," Teacher C asked learners to discuss gender roles and whether they are still relevant in the 21st century. Learners seemed to enjoy the discussion and shared views freely. Themes such as women's empowerment, mutual respect, and independence emerged from them. These were discussed using the mother tongue and English, and the teacher noted the themes in English on the chalkboard. It was noted that learners could easily relate and share ideas using terms they better understand. After reading the text, Teacher C asked the learners to write the summary points on the chalkboard. The researcher concluded that Teacher C could easily build rapport with learners, and the learners felt comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas.

In Teacher B's Grade 10 poetry lesson on "Handcuffs" by Mbuyiseni Mtshali, the teacher came with handcuffs into the classroom. He introduced the lesson by revising the previously learned poem, "The Clothes." He then told them that they would be learning and analysing another poem. He grabbed the handcuffs and asked:

What do I have in my hands, and what do you think it symbolises?
Moreover, what do you think the poem is about?

Learners responded verbally, some without raising their hands:

Ozankosi . . . Iziboshwa . . . Ukuqedwa kwecrime. . . . Sir . . . I think it is about Nelson Mandela and freedom. . . . Maybe it is about the police and what is happening in America. . . . I think inokwenza ne poem esiyenze last week le ye the clothes and now justice will prevail . . .

The teacher then consolidated and narrowed the responses to what he wanted the learners to identify. He allowed learners to code-switch, but he presented the lesson in English with minor switching, especially to emphasise or ask for confirmation

Kuyezwakala [is it clear], hhayi njalo [reprimanding: do not do that].

In Teacher D's observed Grade 10 short story lesson, she taught the story *The Late Bud*. This was a 2-hour lesson on a Saturday. She gave them handouts of the poem and asked them to identify words they

did not understand and translate them. This is another pedagogy (translation) that seemed to help learners understand concepts. Some learners had bilingual dictionaries that were moving around the classroom. Thereafter, learners were divided into groups to discuss the terms, read the story, annotate, and discuss what they thought the story was about. The focus was on characterisation and themes. The learners could identify Maami as a strict character, and Yaaba as a naive and irresponsible child. Learners identified themes of conservative culture, responsibility, childhood, and tough love. This was done using English and the mother tongue fluidly and interchangeably. For example:

UYaaba ingane that is irresponsible, but she is a child, shame. . . . Ma'am, I think Maami is over strict. . . . No, I think umnika tough love and that will make her a strong and independent woman in future. . . . I do not think ukumncisha ukudla is the best punishment, remember this is in Africa where there is poverty vele. . . . What kind of food is Fufu, Ma'am?

This was a translanguaging pedagogy, without the teacher knowing it. The classroom was buzzing with discussion, and you could hear the fluid use of languages and meaning-making (Makalela, 2018; Rajendram, 2023). These findings show that learners who freely use any language easily engage in the classroom. Some learners constantly responded and asked questions using English only, but this was not enforced. It was also noted that even when the teacher kept on with English, they could engage because the introduction created a safe space for them. These classes portrayed the philosophy of ubuntu because they put the learners first. What was more interesting was that the poems studied were South African poems discussing life during apartheid times and sensitising learners to appreciate democracy. This is the pure essence of ubuntu pedagogy.

The Policy Implications

The CAPS (DBE, 2011) acknowledged language as a tool used to think and communicate. Also, it is embedded in aesthetic and cultural nuances that help learners better understand the world by gaining vast knowledge, expressing their identities, and expressing feelings and ideas. The policy acknowledges the richness and diversity of the classrooms, but does not provide clear guidelines on how to manage such classrooms and enhance such skills in the language classroom. The participants in this study were asked to reflect on what they draw from the CAPS in using multilingual pedagogies. It was found that teachers are better versed with the Annual Teaching Plan than with the actual CAPS document. However, they did announce that CAPS does not say much about their use of multilingual pedagogies.

Teacher A: Weeeh, do I even know what CAPS says? Honestly, I use the ATP [annual teaching plan]; CAPS is just in my file. But I do not remember seeing any specific details about code-switching or this trans . . . thing.

Teacher C: I know that our subject advisor always warns us against using isiZulu or isiXhosa for some of us. The argument is that learners will fail exams and quarterly tests. Concerning CAPS, I don't know. I will have to check.

Teacher D: I just use my discretion and embrace the use of isiZulu in my classroom because I know that when it comes to literature, my Grade 11 learners struggle. I have no idea what the policy says. But ke [anyway], if it does not say anything about this, that would be wrong because we live in South Africa, mos.

Teachers A and C were not very sure about the prescriptions of CAPS in terms of using other languages in the classroom; however, they use multiple languages to cater to learners' needs and ensure that learning and teaching are fruitful. What was noted was that teachers mainly consult the ATP, then CAPS. The ATP is more structured for day-to-day use, which may be why they stick to it. Teacher D also shared the same sentiments and emphasised that he uses code-switching in his literature classes because

he understands the learners' needs. However, he was also not sure of what CAPS stipulates. Teacher B held a slightly different view:

I believe CAPS wants me to teach only in English. I know there is something about different languages, but we do not worry much as English teachers. In fact, as much as I teach learners who are not native speakers of English, I try to enforce English only in my classrooms. I rarely allow them to use isiZulu. But I do switch every now and then.

Teacher B held a slightly different view; in her classroom, she is strict and encourages learners only to use English. However, she code-switches when necessary (Shinga & Pillay, 2021; Zondi & Mncube, 2024). She did not share much about whether her learners are more proficient and do well in literature. These findings also clearly show that teachers are primarily familiar with code-switching and its benefits and limitations. They were not familiar with the concept of translanguaging, but it was noted that they practise it without even realising. Teachers consider every linguistic exchange and fluidity as code-switching.

Conclusion

Multilingualism and multilingual pedagogies in the ESL classrooms are a daily occurrence. Teachers use these pedagogies to create a safe space for learners to engage with literature because it is a challenging aspect of the curriculum. Teachers use these pedagogies to enhance comprehension, develop communicative competence, develop vocabulary, and analyse literature. Using multilingual pedagogies in the ESL classroom embraces ubuntu and ubuntu philosophy, which translates to ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy. Ubuntu pedagogy facilitates the embrace of ubuntu values in the classroom. However, there are opposing views on the prevalence and effectiveness of code-switching and translanguaging in the classroom, mainly from the management such as advisors and school management teams.

A limitation of this study is that only a small sample of teachers was interviewed and observed, so the results cannot be generalised. The learners' voices and experiences are also missing. This study recommends that multilingual pedagogies be intellectually infused into the planning of literature lessons. Furthermore, teacher training and language policies should be diversified to embrace the multilingual realities within the ESL classrooms. There is also a need for further research on how the use of multilingual pedagogies impacts other language skills such as reading and writing. Furthermore, the MTBBE should be expanded to language classrooms, and the aims of LiEP should be reintroduced, with the DBE closely monitoring this process. For future research, a larger study within and outside the district should be conducted and should include learners and teachers. Furthermore, it would be necessary to learn how the use of multilingual pedagogies impacts on reading and writing skills.

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Translanguaging for Epistemic Access and Inclusion in a Basic Computing Module – A Freirean Reflective Account

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Abstract

This reflective paper examines the transformation of the Basic Computing Fundamentals module for pre-service teachers in South Africa's Eastern Cape, a region marked by linguistic diversity and persistent digital disparities rooted in apartheid's legacy. Moving beyond a technical skills focus, the module embraced a multilingual, critically engaged pedagogy to foster epistemic access and inclusion by integrating translanguaging. We can use isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English in translated resources, recorded lectures, and peer-led sessions. The redesign, which was improved with the analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (ADDIE) model, empowered students to navigate digital tools through their linguistic identities. Drawing on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, this narrative reflects on three insights: the affordances and challenges of translanguaging, the balance of structure and agency in blended learning, and the lecturer's role in dismantling digital and linguistic exclusion. The paper highlights how intentional pedagogical design can transform digital education into a tool for equity, offering insights for higher education in similarly diverse, unequal contexts.

Keywords: digital literacy, digital equity in higher education, reflective practice, translanguaging, South Africa

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Introduction

In South Africa's Eastern Cape, the challenge of digital literacy in higher education is deeply intertwined with historical inequities. The legacy of apartheid has left a fragmented educational landscape where access to technology remains uneven, particularly in rural and under-resourced communities (Takavarasha et al., 2018). These disparities manifest in a diverse student cohort of pre-service teachers enrolled in Nelson Mandela University's Basic Computing Fundamentals module (PCL 100). There are cases where some students encounter computers for the first time, others use devices with limited proficiency, and a minority possess basic skills but lack fluency in applying them to educational contexts. This spectrum of digital exposure, combined with large class sizes and the accelerated shift to online learning post-2020, has necessitated a significant pedagogical overhaul to ensure equitable skill development (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Faloye & Ajayi, 2022).

Over the past decade, the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into teacher education has transformed pedagogical landscapes (Ntlabathi et al., 2023). The redesign of the PCL 100 module, initially offered by the Computer Science Department, was brought in-house to the Faculty of Education through a comprehensive curriculum renewal process. This purpose was also to recognise students' varied starting points by adopting a scaffolded approach to instruction.

Instruction focused on foundational skills, such as navigating operating systems, mastering basic word processing, and using bilingual instructional materials to accommodate linguistic diversity (e.g. English and isiXhosa). The curriculum emphasised practical, context-relevant applications, such as creating lesson plans in spreadsheets or designing digital presentations, to align with the needs of future classrooms. Integrating digital pedagogies with faculty development initiatives offers significant potential to enhance teaching, mentoring, and research, particularly within the evolving landscape of higher education (Aithal & Aithal, 2023).

In higher education, implementing differentiated instruction poses significant challenges, particularly in large class settings because it demands extensive time for preparation, organisation, and scheduling (Subban et al., 2025). It also remains difficult to accommodate diverse learner needs and preferences, especially those who favour working independently. To address the challenge of large class sizes in my module, blended learning strategies were implemented, combining asynchronous online tutorials with in-person workshops. These online tutorials, hosted on the university's learning management system (LMS), allowed students to progress at their own pace, with embedded assessments to identify and address skills gaps early.

This pedagogical overhaul reflects the broader theme of bridging digital disparities through targeted education. As Lee Shong (2020) observed, a range of interrelated factors, including prior experience with computers, attitudes towards technology, levels of computer anxiety, socioeconomic constraints, and gender, shape the acquisition of computer skills among students. Lee Shong highlighted rural students' disparities when transitioning into technologically advanced learning environments at historically White institutions. One of the key challenges identified was the lack of computer proficiency, which significantly hinders academic engagement and success.

By tailoring instruction to diverse skill levels and contextual challenges, the module demonstrates how higher education can move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to foster digital equity. However, challenges remain, including the need for sustained investment in infrastructure and ongoing professional development for instructors (du Preez & le Grange, 2020). The success of this approach offers other institutions grappling with similar disparities, suggesting that intentional, inclusive curriculum design could transform digital literacy into a tool for empowerment rather than being a barrier. As a lecturer, my journey with computing began in infancy, typing on a family computer in the mid 1990s. Born into South Africa's

post-apartheid “Born Free” generation, I grew up with access to digital tools, from customising desktops with *Dragon Ball Z* themes to playing *Counter-Strike* in high school computer labs. This privilege starkly contrasts with the realities of my students, many from rural areas with limited or no prior computer access. This tension between my digital fluency and my students’ exclusion frames computing education as a social justice issue demanding pedagogical designs prioritising epistemic access and linguistic inclusion.

This paper reflects on my efforts to transform the PCL 100 module into a critical digital learning space. Drawing on translanguaging Vogel et al. (2019) and critical pedagogy Freire (1970), I introduced multilingual resources and restructured the module to bridge digital and linguistic divides. This narrative explores three key insights: the affordances and limitations of translanguaging in digital pedagogy, the balance between structure and agency in online learning, and the lecturer’s role in fostering equitable digital education.

PCL 100, a mandatory module, certifies students’ ability to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and navigate digital platforms like Microsoft Teams. The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified challenges as students navigated virtual environments with varying degrees of digital and linguistic fluency. The module’s original design—English-only, skills-based instruction—assumed a baseline familiarity with computers, an assumption that excluded many students. This prompted a critical question: “How can computing education foster inclusion in a context where digital and linguistic barriers intersect?”

Contextualising the Eastern Cape: A Landscape of Diversity

The Eastern Cape, notably Nelson Mandela Bay, is a microcosm of South Africa’s linguistic and socioeconomic diversity. Students in PCL 100, enrolled in the Bachelor of Education programme, speak languages including isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English, with more than 50 per cent of the student population identifying isiXhosa as their home language (Nelson Mandela University, 2023). Digital access mirrors these disparities; rural students often encounter computers for the first time at university, while urban students may have limited, inefficient exposure. This creates three tiers of learners: those with no computer experience, those with minimal skills, and those with basic but underdeveloped proficiency.

To contextualise the educational backgrounds of the student population in this study, data were sourced from the *Master List of Schools 2023* (Department of Basic Education, 2023). This dataset provided detailed information on all nationwide registered schools, including their geographic location and quintile classification. I isolated and mapped schools within the Eastern Cape province from this dataset, categorising them according to their respective quintiles (see Figures 1–6).

Figure 1

Complete Mapping of All Eastern Cape Schools by Quintiles 1–5

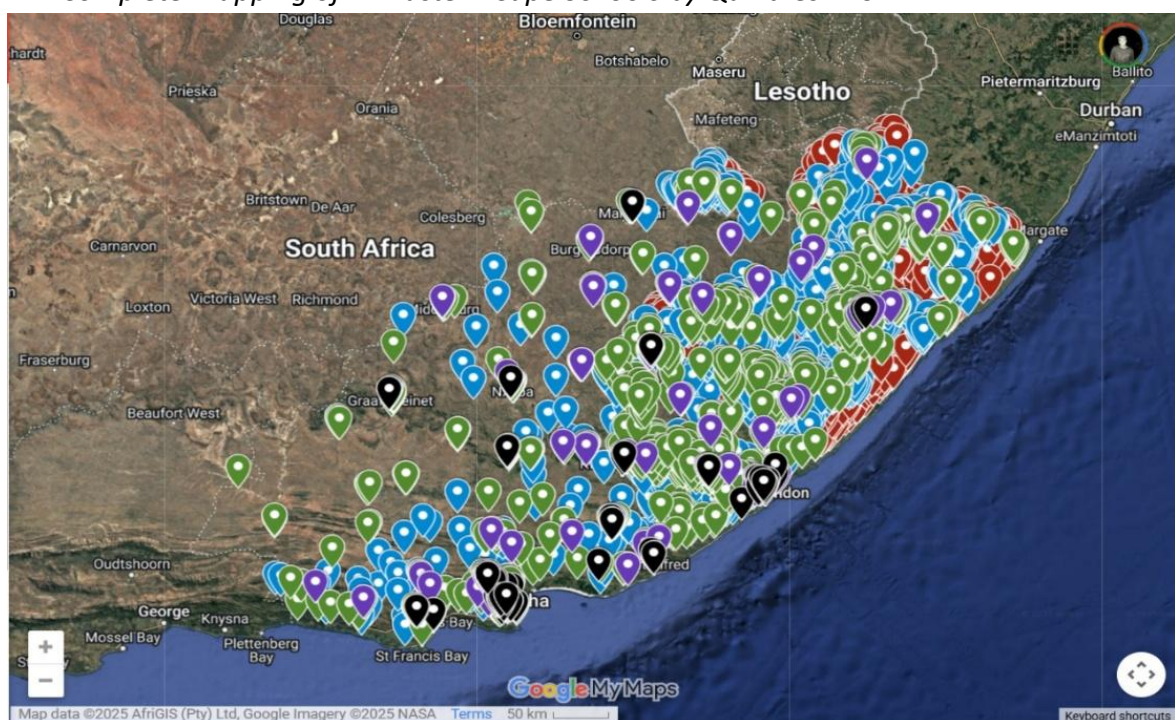


Figure 2
Mapping of Eastern Cape Quintile 1 Schools

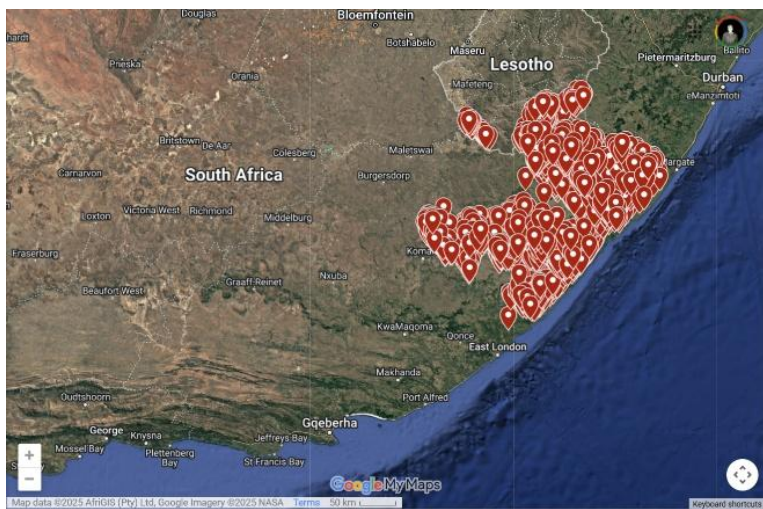


Figure 3
Mapping of Eastern Cape Quintile 2 Schools

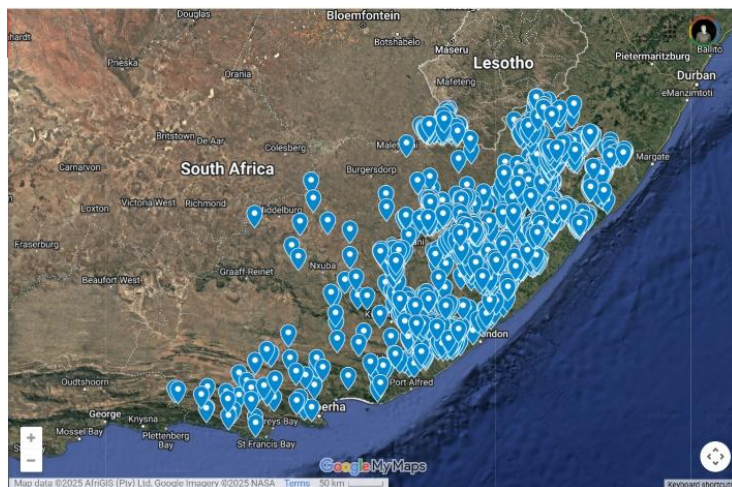


Figure 4
Mapping of Eastern Cape Quintile 3 Schools



Figure 5
Mapping of Eastern Cape Quintile 4 Schools



Figure 6
Mapping of Eastern Cape Quintile 5 Schools

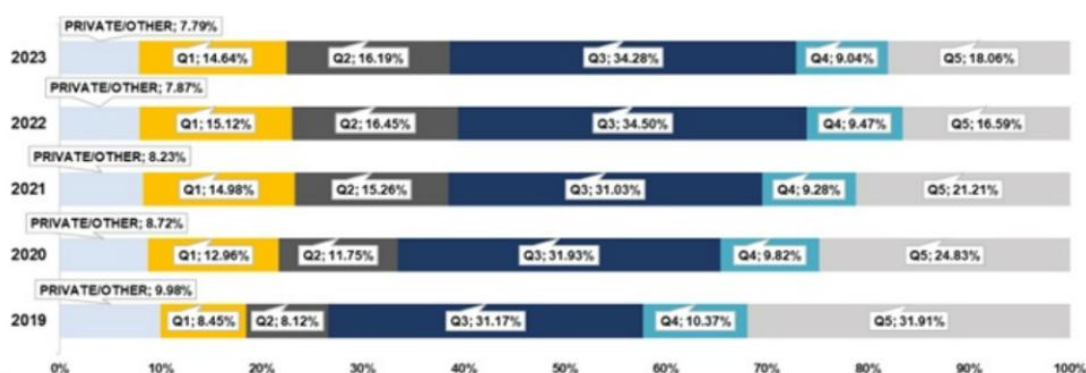


The visual representation of this dataset shows a stark divide across the quintile system, highlighting that a significant proportion of students in the study come from lower-quintile schools (Quintiles 1–3), which are typically under-resourced and located in rural areas. This distribution is critical in understanding the disparities in prior learning environments and access to educational resources that shape students' preparedness for higher education. University enrolment among rural students in South Africa remains alarmingly low, mainly due to the poor secondary school completion rates in these regions. According to Spaul (2015), on average, only about 40 per cent of learners in the country complete matric.

Figure 7 illustrates the shifting demographics of first-time enrolments in higher education at the institution, comparing data from 2019 and 2022. In 2019, 73.4% of enrolments were from Quintiles 3, 4, and 5 schools, which typically serve better-resourced communities, while only 26.6% came from Quintiles 1, 2, and 3 schools, representing historically marginalised groups. By 2022, this trend reversed, with 66% of enrolments (and 65% in the most recent year) from Quintiles 1–3, and only 34% from Quintiles 3–5. This significant increase in representation from under-resourced schools highlights growing access to higher education for marginalised communities, aligning with efforts to promote equity and inclusion in educational opportunities (Nelson Mandela University, 2023).

Figure 7

First-Time Enrolments



The legacy of apartheid in South Africa has entrenched deep socioeconomic inequalities that in turn, have contributed to a persistent digital divide. This divide refers to the unequal access to ICTs, shaped by race, income level, and geographic location (Faloye & Ajayi, 2022; Mphahlele et al., 2021; Nyahodza & Higgs, 2017). In the context of the Eastern Cape, Matobobo and Risinamhodzi (2022) highlighted the significant impact of students' previous learning experiences, particularly at the high school level, on their ability to adapt to higher education environments. Many learners from lower-quintile and rural schools enter university having been socialised into teacher-dependent pedagogies, where learning is primarily driven by the instructor, with limited encouragement for independent thought or self-directed learning. This is sometimes expressed as "repeating whatever the teacher said" (Kimathi & Bertram, 2020, p. 6)

This reliance on the teacher as the primary source of knowledge often results in diminished learner autonomy and a lack of confidence in managing their learning pathways (Kimathi & Bertram, 2020). These challenges are further exacerbated by limited exposure to digital technologies and inadequate resources in many rural schools (Nephalama & Maluleka, 2025). To support students' transition into more autonomous learning environments, the pedagogical strategies should include group discussions conducted in students' home languages (Charamba, 2023).

In my view, this suggests that inclusive practices validate learners' linguistic identities and help bridge the gap between their prior learning contexts and the demands of higher education.

Method

This study employed a reflective practitioner methodology. “Reflective practice is part of a wider methodological approach that helps academics critically review their own and their participants’ views, perceptions, biases and ways of knowing” (Arnold et al., 2022, p. 9). Narrative inquiry involves exploring and understanding stories as they are experienced and shared (Creswell, 2006). Drawing on narrative inquiry to explore the redesign of the PCL 100 module, and by combining reflective practice with narrative inquiry, this study foregrounds my role as a lecturer-researcher in tracing how the redesign was shaped by context, experience, and interpretation. As a lecturer-researcher, I systematically reflected on my teaching practices, positionality, and curriculum design choices in response to the Eastern Cape’s multilingual and digitally unequal landscape. Following Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy, the methodology foregrounded the political and ethical dimensions of teaching, positioning reflection not only as self-examination but also as an interrogation of how pedagogy can reproduce or disrupt systemic inequalities in access to digital education.

The curriculum redesign process was structured through the analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (ADDIE) model, which offered a systematic yet flexible framework for embedding translanguaging and inclusive pedagogical strategies. The analysis phase drew on observations to identify three tiers of learners with differing levels of digital proficiency. In the design and development phases, multilingual resources were created alongside bilingual tutorials, peer-led sessions, and blended learning strategies. The implementation phase combined asynchronous online modules with in-person workshops, while the evaluation phase drew on reflective journals, teaching artefacts, and informal feedback to iteratively improve the module.

Ethical considerations were central to this reflective inquiry. Given that the paper draws primarily on the lecturer’s reflections, teaching artefacts, and curriculum design processes and does not involve collecting identifiable student data, formal ethics clearance was not required (Pool & Reitsma, 2017). This stance aligns with scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literature, emphasising that reflective, practitioner-based work without systematic data collection may not necessitate formal review (Pool & Reitsma, 2017; Vorster, 2020). Furthermore, institutional approaches that embed ethics into SoTL practice through collaborative frameworks offer guidance for navigating ethical decision-making without institutional ethics involvement (Fedoruk, 2022).

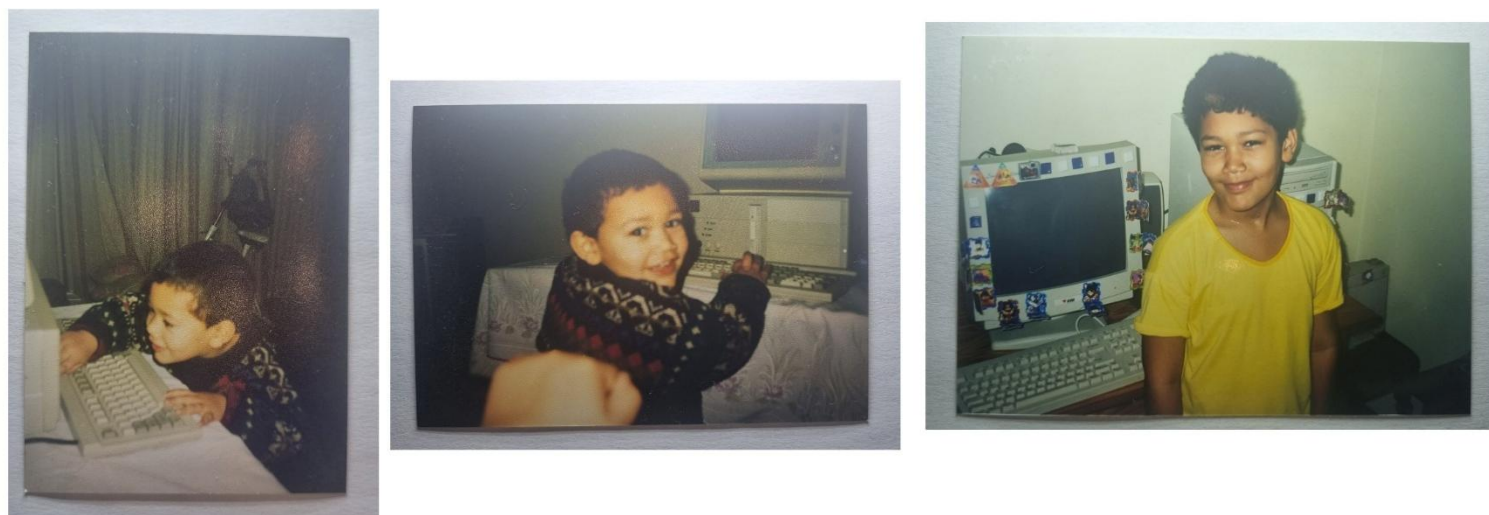
From Privilege to Critical Pedagogy: A Freirean Reflection

My relationship with computers is rooted in both personal and sociohistorical contexts. From an early age, I was immersed in a technologically enriched environment shaped by my parents’ foresight, both teachers in post-apartheid South Africa. Photographs (see Figure 8) from the 1990s capture this privilege: a 2-year-old version of myself interacting with a keyboard, initiating a relationship with technology that would become integral to my identity. Therefore, this reflection examines how that early privilege evolved into a more critically informed stance, framed first in this paper through the section, From Privilege to Critical Pedagogy: A Freirean Reflection and next, through the Translanguaging and the Humanisation of Digital Pedagogy section.

In the 1990s, during South Africa’s democratic transition, engagement with educational technologies symbolised progress and modernity, yet access remained deeply stratified along racial and socioeconomic lines. My home environment, enriched with early access to computers, afforded me fluency and familiarity that extended into leisure and academic pursuits, customising desktops, experimenting with gamification, and engaging with computer games such as *Counter-Strike*. These experiences fostered confidence in navigating digital tools that would later shape my pedagogical approach.

Figure 8

Pictures From the 1990s Showing My Access to a Home Computer



However, as Freire (1970) reminded us, education is never neutral; it either reproduces or challenges systems of domination. While empowering for me, my early encounters with technology revealed a broader reality of exclusion for many South African learners. Schools without electricity, households without devices, and students with minimal computer exposure challenged the assumption that digital skills were universally accessible. This recognition shifted my trajectory from seeing technology as a personal asset to viewing it through the lens of structural inequality.

Upon entering teacher education in 2014, I fully confronted this reality. Surrounded by peers from diverse rural and urban contexts across the Eastern Cape, I encountered students whose educational experiences contrasted sharply with mine. This heterogeneity destabilised the epistemic assumptions I had previously taken for granted, leading me to critical pedagogy as a framework. Through Freire (1970), I came to understand how the dominant narratives of digital “literacy” assume linear progress, baseline access, and English fluency—assumptions that obscure structural inequities and pathologise students as digitally “illiterate” rather than structurally disadvantaged (Lee Shong, 2020). Critical pedagogy thus became more than theory; it reshaped my teaching philosophy. It taught me to interrogate digital education not as a neutral skill set but as a political practice that must humanise, contextualise, and empower. This continues to inform my practice as I strive to nurture critically conscious, agentive, and socially aware digital citizens rather than simply producing “competent” graduates.

Translanguaging and the Humanisation of Digital Pedagogy

Guided by Freire’s (1970) conception of students as *cognising subjects*, I began to recognise that the dominance of English in digital environments functions as more than a linguistic preference; it is an epistemological gatekeeper. Interfaces, platforms, and curricula constructed around English implicitly exclude students’ home languages and, by extension, their cultural knowledges. This reinforced hierarchies of access and participation in my own classes.

Adopting translanguaging as a pedagogical stance allowed me to disrupt this linguistic hegemony. As Allman et al. (2009) argued, translanguaging affirms the fluid and integrated use of multiple linguistic resources, positioning students’ home languages as assets rather than deficits. Within the PCL 100 module, I encouraged students to use isiXhosa, Afrikaans, or Sesotho alongside English to navigate concepts, discuss tasks, and contextualise digital skills. A richer, dialogic learning space emerged where students could articulate understanding in ways that honoured their linguistic repertoires.

This practice revealed the limitations of a mechanistic, demonstration-based approach to computing education. Over-reliance on rote technical tasks, as Le and Pole (2023) warned, risks producing dependent learners who reproduce actions without a more profound understanding. A translanguaging pedagogy foregrounds dialogue, critical literacy, and relational care. It shifts the focus from tool mastery to epistemic justice—enabling students to see themselves as active, multilingual agents in the digital world (Villar-Onrubia et al., 2022). My journey from technological privilege to translanguaging practice reflects a broader commitment: to humanise digital learning by centring students' lived realities.

Pedagogical Interventions: Translanguaging and Multilingual Resources

South African higher education must embrace multilingualism by valuing first-language development to ensure inclusive education. Makhanya & Zibane (2020) noted in their findings, except for English and Afrikaans, South Africa's nine other official languages lack academic development, creating barriers for their speakers in higher education without multilingual practices. Encouraging translanguaging, where students and lecturers integrate multiple languages in class discussions, enables epistemological meaning-making and fosters equitable access to knowledge (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). It seems to me that higher education must adopt a bottom-up approach to transform its language policy to prioritise African languages and foster multilingualism, addressing the social justice imperative highlighted by unimplemented national policies and student activism.

By adopting a bottom-up approach that centres student and staff voices, my university can create an inclusive policy that reflects its African identity, ensures equitable access to education, and aligns with its namesake's vision of linguistic inclusion (Mayaba, 2018). Drawing from my experience implementing this approach was not without challenges. One example is that software platforms often lacked support for South African languages, and tools such as Microsoft Word underlined Afrikaans or isiXhosa text as incorrect. Important to note is that structural and technological barriers have been increasingly addressed (Prinsloo et al., 2022). I maintain that implementations of multilingual digital pedagogy continue to require intentional strategies, resourcefulness, and ongoing reflection to ensure that all students can fully participate and see their languages valued in academic and digital spaces.

In response to my context's persistent digital and linguistic exclusion, I deliberately restructured the PCL 100 module by embedding translanguaging as a central pedagogical principle. Drawing on the work of Vogel et al. (2019), translanguaging is understood as the dynamic and flexible use of multiple languages to facilitate and deepen learning, allowing students to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires rather than being restricted to a single language of instruction. In my opinion, this approach is particularly salient in the South African context, where the linguistic diversity of students often clashes with the dominant use of English in digital interfaces and educational materials.

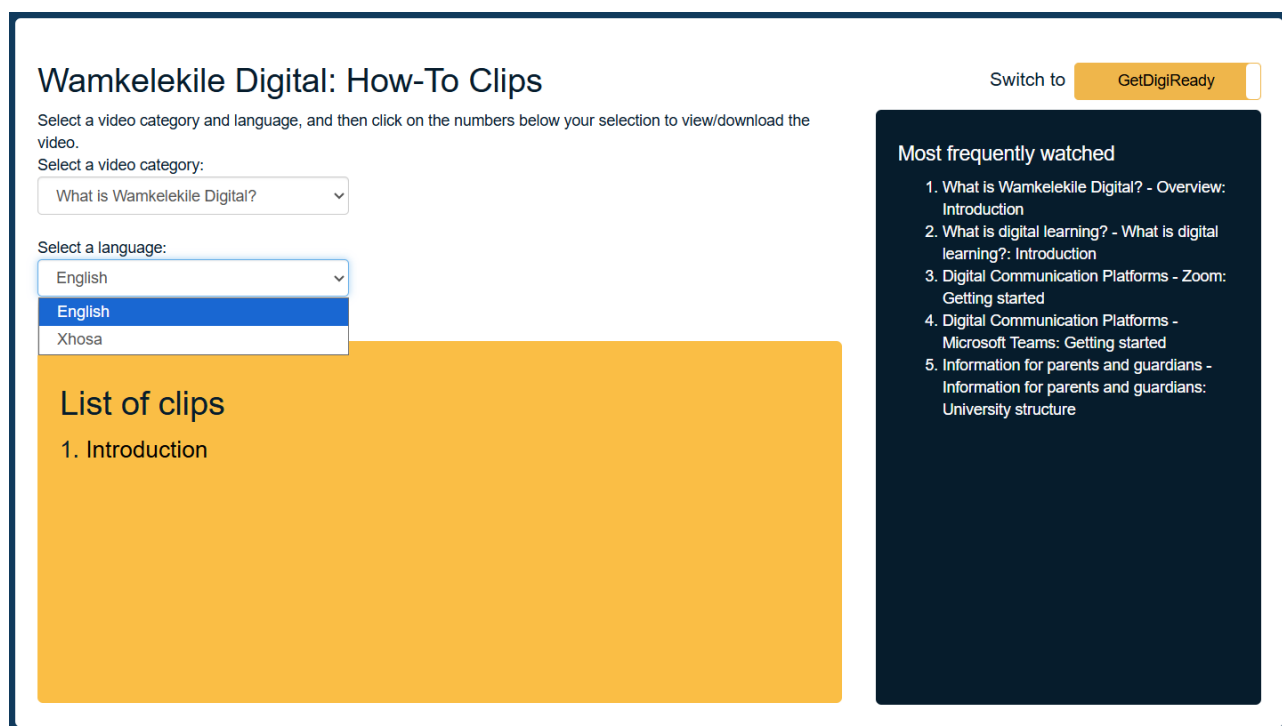
Building on this foundation, the work of Cenoz and Gorter (2022) offers further theoretical and practical grounding for applying translanguaging in multilingual educational settings. They argued that learning is enhanced when rigid boundaries between languages are replaced with soft and permeable boundaries, allowing students to draw on their prior linguistic knowledge when engaging with new content in a second or additional language. In contrast to monolingual ideologies that isolate languages into discrete categories, pedagogical translanguaging creates space for the simultaneous and integrated use of all linguistic resources available to learners (Bailey et al., 2025). From my standpoint, this is not merely a strategy for inclusion, but a principled pedagogical stance that affirms the linguistic identities of students and recognises their home languages as assets in the learning process. The module's redesign included three key interventions, discussed in turn below: multilingual onboarding resources, translated lectures and materials, and multilingual practical sessions.

Multilingual Onboarding Resources

At the semester's start, students received a multilingual digital onboarding guide developed by Nelson Mandela University's School of Information Technology (see Figure 9). This guide was disseminated through multiple channels: it was emailed directly to students and also shared via the module's WhatsApp group with explicit step-by-step instructions. The resources were available in English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa, allowing students to select their preferred language and engage with the material in a way that aligned with their linguistic background.

Figure 9

Multilingual Digital Onboarding Guide



The guide itself was smartphone-friendly and consisted of short, video-based demonstrations. These covered essential processes such as navigating the university's student portal, setting up Microsoft Teams for hybrid lectures, and logging into and working with the Moodle LMS. In addition, the videos provided foundational support in basic computer functions, ensuring that even students entering higher education with minimal digital literacy could participate meaningfully from the outset.

This learning technology was critical for the process because when used as an onboarding strategy, it functioned as an important first safety net. It offers a common starting point that enables all students to access lectures and course content regardless of their prior skill level. For those who continued to experience challenges, in-person practical sessions were an additional support layer where lecturers could provide one-on-one assistance.

Such onboarding practices are particularly critical in higher education, where the technological competencies of first-year students vary widely (Nash, 2013). In a hybrid learning context, where synchronous online engagement is essential, scaffolding the initial stages of digital access ensures inclusivity and reduces barriers to participation (Gerber & Eybers, 2021). I posit that such an online resource, as shown in Figure 9, was not merely a technical guide but an intentional pedagogical tool to create equitable conditions for student success from the beginning of the module.

Translated Lectures and Materials

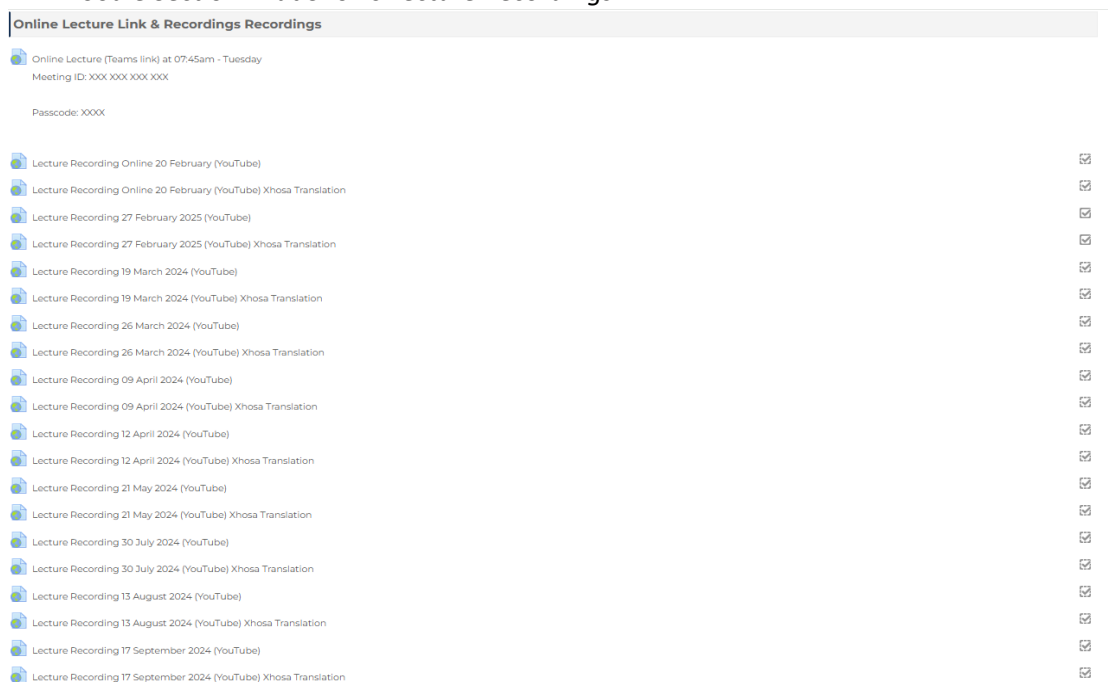
Figures 10 and 11 illustrate how multilingual and digital resources were embedded into the curriculum to foster inclusivity and flexibility in learning. Figure 10 presents the curriculum overview, demonstrating how students initially received paper-based resources that were digitalised and enhanced through translanguaging. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools supported this process, facilitating translation into isiXhosa and helping with administrative tasks. These multilingual resources were made available in English and isiXhosa on the Moodle LMS. This was intended to enable students to access curriculum materials in their home language and created equitable entry points into the module.

Figure 10

Curriculum Overview Translated by Grok

<p>PCTL100: Computer Literacy Credits: 12</p> <p>Purpose: The purpose of this module is to equip students with basic computer literacy related to email, the internet, Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint by means of a hands-on and practical approach within the context of what a teacher does.</p> <p>Learning Outcomes:</p> <p>After the completion of this module, students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate how to use the Internet to find information • Demonstrate how to use email to communicate with students and lecturer(s) by practically sending emails and attachments to fellow students and/or the lecturer • Practically demonstrate his/her basic computer skills in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel <p>Core Content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary skills related to word-processing, spreadsheets, email, the internet, and electronic presentations <p>Assessment: 100% CASS</p> <p>Pre-requisites for this module (If any) None</p> <p>PCTL100 Credits: 12 Technology Mediated Lectures: 36 In-person - Tutorials (with tutor/lecturer): 36 Practicals and laboratory work: 20 Practical work-based experience (internships, placements) : 0 Independent self-study of standard texts and references: 20 Independent study of specially prepared materials: 8</p> <p>TABLE OF CONTENTS</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Section 1 – Introduction to Computing</td> <td style="text-align: right;">1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Section 2 – Windows – The Operating System</td> <td style="text-align: right;">4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Section 3 – Email, Internet, Learn & Student portal</td> <td style="text-align: right;">8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Section 4 – Microsoft Word</td> <td style="text-align: right;">16</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Section 5 - Microsoft Word (Continued)</td> <td style="text-align: right;">24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Section 6 – Microsoft Excel</td> <td style="text-align: right;">33</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Section 7 – Microsoft Powerpoint</td> <td style="text-align: right;">53</td> </tr> </table>	Section 1 – Introduction to Computing	1	Section 2 – Windows – The Operating System	4	Section 3 – Email, Internet, Learn & Student portal	8	Section 4 – Microsoft Word	16	Section 5 - Microsoft Word (Continued)	24	Section 6 – Microsoft Excel	33	Section 7 – Microsoft Powerpoint	53	<p>PCTL100: Utywazi Lweekhompuyutha likhredithi: 12</p> <p>Injongo: Injongo yale module kukuxhobisa abafundi ngolwazi olusisiseko lweekhompuyutha oluxulumene ne-imeyile, i-intanethi, i-Microsoft Word, Excel kunye nePowerPoint ngendlela esekelwe ekusebenziseni nasekuqheliseni, ngaphakathi komxholo wemisebenzi yomfundo yomfundisi.</p> <p>Iziphumo zokufunda: Emva kokugqiba le module abafundi baya kukwazi:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukubonisa indlela yokusebenzisa i-intanethi ukufumana utwazi. • Ukubonisa indlela yokusebenzisa i-imeyile ukuxhibelelana nabafundi kunye nootitshala ngokuthumela ngokwenene i-imeyile kunye neziqhuboshelo kwabanye abafundi okanye kumfundisi. • Ukubonisa ngokusobenzayo izakhono zakhe ezisisiseko kwiMicrosoft Word, PowerPoint kunye neExcel. <p>Umxholo oyintloko:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Izakhono ezisisiseko ezinxulumene nokuhlala umbhalo (word-processing), iispredishithi (spread sheets), i-imeyile, i-intanethi, kunye neentotho zodijithali (electronic presentations). <p>Uvavanyo: 100% CASS (Continuous Assessment)</p> <p>Iimfuno zangaphambi kokungena kule module (ukuba zikhona): Azikho</p> <p>PCTL100</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>likhredithi:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">12</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Iintetho ezixhaswa ngetekhnoloji:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">36</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Izikolo zobuso ngobuso (ezinotitshala okanye umtutyu):</td> <td style="text-align: right;">36</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Iimisebenzi esebenzayo kunye nezifundo zelaboratri:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">20</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Amava asemisebenzini (internships, placements):</td> <td style="text-align: right;">0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ukuzifundela ngokuzimeleyo iincwadi kunye nezalathiso eziqhetekileyo:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">20</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ukuzifundela ngokuzimeleyo izinto ezilungiselelwe ngokukodwa:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">8</td> </tr> </table> <p>Ulawulo Lomxholo (Table of Contents):</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Icandelo 1 – Intshayelelo kwiKhompuyutha</td> <td style="text-align: right;">1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Icandelo 2 – Windows – Inkqubo Esebenzayo</td> <td style="text-align: right;">4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Icandelo 3 – I-imeyile, i-Intanethi, Learn & Student Portal</td> <td style="text-align: right;">8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Icandelo 4 – Microsoft Word</td> <td style="text-align: right;">16</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Icandelo 5 – Microsoft Word (Iqhubokeka)</td> <td style="text-align: right;">24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Icandelo 6 – Microsoft Excel</td> <td style="text-align: right;">33</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Icandelo 7 – Microsoft PowerPoint</td> <td style="text-align: right;">53</td> </tr> </table>	likhredithi:	12	Iintetho ezixhaswa ngetekhnoloji:	36	Izikolo zobuso ngobuso (ezinotitshala okanye umtutyu):	36	Iimisebenzi esebenzayo kunye nezifundo zelaboratri:	20	Amava asemisebenzini (internships, placements):	0	Ukuzifundela ngokuzimeleyo iincwadi kunye nezalathiso eziqhetekileyo:	20	Ukuzifundela ngokuzimeleyo izinto ezilungiselelwe ngokukodwa:	8	Icandelo 1 – Intshayelelo kwiKhompuyutha	1	Icandelo 2 – Windows – Inkqubo Esebenzayo	4	Icandelo 3 – I-imeyile, i-Intanethi, Learn & Student Portal	8	Icandelo 4 – Microsoft Word	16	Icandelo 5 – Microsoft Word (Iqhubokeka)	24	Icandelo 6 – Microsoft Excel	33	Icandelo 7 – Microsoft PowerPoint	53
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Figure 11 shows the lecture classes section on the LMS, thoughtfully designed for synchronous and asynchronous learning. Students were able to join live lectures via Microsoft Teams embedded within Moodle. Each session was recorded, uploaded to YouTube, and embedded back into Moodle—offering students the option to pause, replay, and revisit the material at their own pace and in a space that suited them best. I considered this functionality to be vital; it addressed needs for repetition or clarification, offered a fall-back for technical disruptions, and served as a revision tool. Beneath, translated versions of each recorded lecture—typically in isiXhosa—were provided so students could watch the lesson in their mother tongue. Additionally, colleagues or AI tools like Grok translated and verified study guides and selected PowerPoint slides to ensure accuracy and cultural/contextual relevance.

Figure 11*Moodle Section That Shows Lecture Recordings*

This approach leveraged translanguaging as a core pedagogical strategy. Students were encouraged to use their full linguistic repertoires to construct meaning, clarify concepts, and scaffold understanding of technical ICT terminology—rejecting monolingual norms and affirming their multilingual identities. In my view, the availability of asynchronous YouTube recordings also granted students autonomy over their learning; they could revisit complex content, overcome barriers due to language or technology, and build confidence independently.

Such practices reflect insights from established translanguaging scholarship, which conceptualises translanguaging not merely as code-switching, but as the deliberate application of a learner's linguistic repertoire to enhance cognitive and social engagement. García & Lin (2016) translanguaging means speakers use all their language skills freely, without worrying about keeping languages separate according to social or political rules. It focuses on how people draw on their linguistic background to communicate, think creatively, and critically engage in multilingual learning spaces.

Multilingual Practical Sessions

In addition to digital onboarding and translated lecture resources, a strong emphasis was placed on in-person practical sessions as a key component of the module. As shown in Figure 10, students completed approximately 36 tutorials across the academic year. These tutorials accounted for 25 per cent of the final grade; however, they were deliberately framed not only as assessments but also as opportunities for authentic learning, practice, and collaborative engagement.

To maximise the value of these sessions, tutors were strategically selected from among peers who had previously excelled in the module, achieving distinction-level results (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). This approach ensured that tutors were both academically competent and familiar with the specific challenges students might face. Practical sessions were then organised by phase groupings, creating smaller, more manageable learning communities where students could receive personalised support.

A distinctive feature of these sessions was their multilingual dimension. Tutors were encouraged to draw on their linguistic repertoires—English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa—when assisting students. This practice allowed questions to be asked and explained in whichever language students felt most comfortable using. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as a challenge to be overcome, the sessions

positioned it as a pedagogical asset, enabling students to access ICT concepts in meaningful and familiar ways.

The fact that the sessions were held in computer laboratories added to their value. As controlled environments, the labs provided both the necessary technical infrastructure and a safe space for students to experiment, attempt tasks, and learn by doing (Mundy et al., 2023). Translanguaging was not confined to theoretical discussion but became a practical tool for clarifying instructions, scaffolding complex technical skills, and bridging the gap between home language practices and the specialised discourse of computational literacies.

These interventions resonate strongly with Vogel et al.'s (2019) argument that translanguaging functions as a bridge between students' everyday linguistic practices and the development of domain-specific literacies. By embedding multilingual practices into the computer lab environment, the practical sessions offered students epistemic access to knowledge and skills that might otherwise remain out of reach. I believe that the tutorials did more than prepare students for assessments—they cultivated agency, confidence, and critical engagement with technology. As I reflect on these sessions, I think back to Freire (1970), who told us that dialogue for transformative emancipatory education cannot exist without love, hope, and faith.

Translanguaging for Equity: Opportunities and Challenges in Digital Pedagogy—Insights and Reflections

Translanguaging emerged as a cornerstone of inclusive pedagogy when reimagining the PCL 100 module for pre-service teachers in South Africa's Eastern Cape. This approach, which embraces the fluid use of students' full linguistic repertoires, spanning isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English, sought to bridge digital and linguistic divides in a context marked by historical inequities. The following section explores the affordances of translanguaging in fostering epistemic access and student agency, while reflecting on its practical challenges. By leveraging multilingual resources, varied instructional methods, and student-led discussions, translanguaging transformed the classroom into a space where linguistic diversity became a strength.

Affordances and Limitations of Translanguaging

Translanguaging is the dynamic and fluid process by which multilingual individuals deploy their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire, including multiple languages and modes such as gestures, without adhering to the socially or politically constructed boundaries of named languages (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Kleifgen, 2019). It views bilingualism as a unitary semiotic system, enabling spontaneous, creative, and critical meaning-making (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Kleifgen, 2019). As García and Kleifgen (2019, p. 557) noted, translanguaging involves “the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named . . . languages,” while Creese and Blackledge (2015, p. 28) emphasised that it creates “new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges.”

Translanguaging empowers multilingual students in educational settings by leveraging their home languages and cultural identities, fostering deeper engagement with literacy and critical awareness. García and Kleifgen (2019) highlighted how annotating texts with students' linguistic repertoires deepens comprehension, generates diverse texts, builds confidence, and fosters metalinguistic awareness, for example, students engaging with bilingual texts recognise their identities, enhancing literacy practices. This pedagogy liberates language-minoritised students by challenging monolingual ideologies and creating “trans-spaces” that disrupt linguistic hierarchies, promoting social justice and equity (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Kleifgen, 2019).

Translanguaging proved transformative in enabling epistemic access. Students had confidence when engaging with content in their home language, particularly in practical sessions where tutors clarified concepts in isiXhosa or Afrikaans. This is in line with (Rajendram, 2023) whose findings indicated that collaborative learning creates a supportive environment where learners' language practices flourish through translanguaging; in small groups where all members actively use multiple languages, learners feel empowered to leverage translanguaging to enhance language learning, foster rapport, resolve conflicts, affirm their cultural identity, and utilise their diverse linguistic knowledge and skills.

I implemented translanguaging to leverage students' multilingual repertoires, creating an inclusive and dynamic learning environment. Reflecting on this experience, I recognise how translanguaging, defined as the fluid deployment of a speaker's complete linguistic and semiotic resources without adhering to named language boundaries (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Kleifgen, 2019), empowered my students, and enhanced their engagement with course content. This reflection highlights three key affordances of translanguaging in my classroom: resource planning, varied instruction, and student-led multilingual discussions.

Initially, translanguaging was facilitated through strategic resource planning. At the beginning of the academic year, core materials were translated into multiple languages, including isiXhosa and Afrikaans, ensuring accessibility before the module began. This aligns with García and Kleifgen's (2019) emphasis on leveraging students' home languages to deepen comprehension. By providing translated resources, I ensured students could engage with content in their preferred languages, setting a foundation for inclusive learning. This planned approach normalised bilingualism, as described by Creese and Blackledge (2015, p. 26), who noted that translanguaging creates "new languaging realities" that value diverse linguistic practices.

The second affordance was varied instruction, incorporating translanguaging into live and recorded lessons. Live lectures were delivered primarily in English to accommodate the entire class, but I also created concise video summaries of core content, translated into isiXhosa for students needing additional support. Data analysis of my video retention rates revealed where students' attention waned, allowing me to produce meaningful bytes of information—short, targeted videos that maintained engagement. This approach reflects García and Kleifgen's (2019) assertion that translanguaging fosters diverse text production and comprehension. By offering content in multiple languages and formats, I addressed varied linguistic needs, enabling students to construct deeper understandings, as Creese and Blackledge (2015) suggested that translanguaging facilitates.

Finally, translanguaging was most transformative in student-led multilingual discussions during in-person tutorials. In a large venue, tutors fluent in Afrikaans and isiXhosa facilitated peer discussions, allowing students to explore concepts in their home languages. This practice empowered students to articulate ideas confidently, aligning with García and Kleifgen's (2019) concept of *confianza* in literacy practices. These discussions supported computer-based tutorial tasks and tests, where students could clarify concepts with peers and tutors in their preferred languages. Creese and Blackledge (2015) highlighted that such translanguaging spaces enable identity investment and sociopolitical engagement, as seen when students negotiated cultural and linguistic identities through peer interactions. This approach challenged monolingual classroom norms, creating a learning environment that disrupted linguistic hierarchies (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

Reflecting on these affordances, I realise that translanguaging enhances access to content and empowers students to see their linguistic and cultural identities as assets. By integrating translated resources, varied instructional formats, and multilingual peer discussions, I created a learning environment that aimed to be aligned with my students' lived realities. I aim to further refine these strategies, perhaps

by incorporating more student-generated multilingual content, to continue fostering critical and creative engagement in my classroom.

Tensions Between Structure and Agency

The online learning environment, structured around Moodle's activity completion tracking, exemplifies the interplay of social structure and human agency as key factors shaping educational outcomes (Ellery & Baxen, 2015). This system provides balanced support through automated weekly progress reports generated via Excel and emailed to students, fostering accountability while encouraging active engagement. For instance, a mail-merged email stating, "You are falling behind on Excel tasks—let us catch up!" spurred increased submissions by empowering students to exercise agency in managing their learning. Contrary to sociocultural approaches that often position students as passive recipients, this design acknowledges and leverages student agency and reflexivity, countering deficit discourses that undervalue individual capacity within pedagogical efforts (Ellery & Baxen, 2015). By integrating structured support with opportunities for self-directed action, the environment aligns with translanguaging principles, enabling multilingual students to draw on their linguistic repertoires to engage meaningfully with the curriculum.

Reflecting on my journey as a lecturer working with students from diverse communities, I have observed that access to higher education is only the first step. Fostering student agency through technology is critical to surpassing minimal achievement (e.g. a 50% pass mark). Jones & Healing (2010) challenged the "digital natives" assumption, showing through mixed-methods research, that students' deliberate choices, not just exposure, shape their technology use. In my classroom, I have seen students actively engage with Moodle's progress tracking and personalised email prompts to take ownership of their learning, often using translanguaging to collaborate and express their cultural identities. Ultimately, you want to guide students in countering deficit views by empowering them to navigate and overcome technological and linguistic barriers, aligning with the module outcomes and allowing students to thrive.

However, this structure conflicted with learner agency. Students progressed at different rates, especially those unfamiliar with computers. To tackle this issue, I introduced peer-led study groups, inspired by an unexpected student initiative. Students organised mock lessons in the ICT lab during one semester, practising Excel's conditional formatting. This resulted in an 80 per cent distinction rate on a challenging weekly tutorial, showcasing the effectiveness of community-driven learning. Nevertheless, maintaining such agency required ongoing facilitation, emphasising the lecturer's role in supporting autonomy without imposing rigid timelines.

The Lecturer's Role in Facilitating Digital Epistemic Access

As a lecturer, I viewed myself as a facilitator of access, rather than a gatekeeper of knowledge. This aligned with Freire's (1970) rejection of *banking* education, where students are passive recipients. By integrating translanguaging and tracking student progress, I aimed to create a learning environment where students felt seen and supported. However, I grappled with my privilege—my comfort with technology contrasted with students' struggles, necessitating humility and empathy.

Du Preez & le Grange (2020) argued that while technical and pedagogical competence is essential, it is equally important for lecturers to understand the diverse contexts from which students come. They cautioned that face-to-face teaching does not inherently guarantee epistemological access or erase historical disadvantages. However, it can help level certain aspects such as giving all students equal access to campus-based resources. However, they noted that such levelling is far more challenging in online learning environments, often amplifying existing inequalities. In contrast, my approach has been to deliberately integrate both face-to-face and online learning modalities within the same week, allowing students to benefit from the affordances of each mode. This blended approach offers the immediacy and resource equity of in-person learning and leverages the flexibility, reflection time, and multimodal

engagement made possible through online platforms. It is critical to recognise that no single mode of delivery guarantees epistemological access. Instead, a hybrid model responsive to learners' socioeducational backgrounds and linguistic identities holds greater promise for mitigating inherited disadvantage, and fostering more inclusive learning experiences.

This reinforced the lecturer's responsibility to critically integrate technology, ensuring it promotes inclusion rather than perpetuates exclusion. These insights and reflections demanded a structured yet flexible approach to embed translanguaging within a context of linguistic and digital disparities. The ADDIE model provided a robust framework to integrate this pedagogy, enabling a learner-centred design that prioritised inclusivity and epistemic access (Hanna et al., 2022). The following section explores how ADDIE's systematic phases supported the creation of a multilingual digital learning environment, fostering critical engagement and agency among pre-service teachers. The module transformed the learning environment by aligning translanguaging with intentional instructional design.

Instructional Design: Principles for Inclusion

The ADDIE model provided a systematic framework to support translanguaging pedagogy, defined as the fluid use of a learner's full linguistic and semiotic repertoire without adhering to named language boundaries in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Kleifgen, 2019). By scaffolding translanguaging through structured phases, ADDIE ensures inclusive, learner-centred instructional designs that foster linguistic emancipation, critical thinking, agency, and epistemic access. Insights from Shao (2024), Yüzlü & Dikilitaş (2022), Hanna et al. (2022), and personal reflections illustrate how ADDIE supports translanguaging across various contexts, empowering multilingual learners.

In the analysis phase, ADDIE underpins translanguaging by identifying learners' linguistic, cultural, and contextual needs to shape equitable instructional goals. Shao (2024) noted that business English (BE) teachers in China analysed students' limited English proficiency, leading to bilingual strategies. Yüzlü and Dikilitaş (2022) assessed Turkish EFL learners' needs for hybrid learning to enhance critical thinking. Hanna et al. (2022) found that Arabic-speaking migrants in Australia face challenges with English proficiency and ICT skills, which informed the development of the START e-business programme (<http://istartproject.net/>). In my PCL 100 module, I noted that South African pre-service teachers' reliance on isiXhosa and Afrikaans for digital literacy tasks prompted objectives that embraced multilingualism (García & Kleifgen, 2019). ADDIE's analysis ensures that translanguaging addresses diverse needs and challenges linguistic hierarchies (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

This analysis naturally leads into the design phase, where the insights gathered about learners' linguistic and cultural needs directly inform how I should structure content, choose resources, and plan activities. By understanding the specific ways students navigate multiple languages in digital tasks, I can intentionally design learning experiences that leverage their multilingual strengths, scaffold comprehension, and promote equitable participation. This ensures that translanguaging is not just an add-on but a foundational principle guiding how the module is organised and delivered. The design phase leverages ADDIE to structure translanguaging through objectives that promote fluid language use. Shao (2024) designed BE tasks like bilingual case studies to reduce learner anxiety. Yüzlü and Dikilitaş (2022) created Canvas (<https://www.instructure.com/canvas>) activities blending Turkish and English to foster criticality. Hanna et al. (2022) developed START's 10 modules with Arabic-English tasks, like business plan creation aligned with English for Specific Purposes. In PCL 100, objectives incorporated translated resources and multilingual peer discussions in isiXhosa and Afrikaans. ADDIE's design phase ensures translanguaging supports collaborative, inclusive learning (Rajendram, 2023).

The careful design of objectives and activities sets the stage for the development phase, where these plans are transformed into tangible learning materials and resources. By translating objectives into

multilingual content, interactive exercises, and peer-supported tasks, I can create learning tools that genuinely reflect students' linguistic realities. This ensures that the development process not only implements the design intentions but also strengthens equitable, collaborative, and inclusive learning experiences. In the development phase, ADDIE facilitates translanguaging by producing bilingual and multimodal resources. Shao (2024) developed BE materials, including Chinese-English slides and videos. Yüzlü and Dikilitaş (2022) created Canvas modules with audio-visual content for self-regulated learning. Hanna et al. (2022) crafted START's Chamilo-hosted lessons with Arabic-English glossaries, video transcripts, and interactive forums. In PCL 100, core materials were translated into isiXhosa and Afrikaans, and concise video summaries supplemented English lectures, supporting García and Kleifgen's (2019) call for diverse text production. Video retention data informed meaningful bytes to sustain engagement, ensuring translanguaging resources promote autonomous knowledge construction (Hanna et al., 2022).

The resources developed during this phase naturally flow into the implementation phase, where they are actively used to facilitate learning. By deploying bilingual and multimodal materials in real classrooms and online contexts, a lecturer can observe how students engage with content across languages, adapt instruction in response to their needs, and support collaborative knowledge construction. During the implementation phase, ADDIE operationalises translanguaging through dynamic, student-centred methods. Shao (2024) employed BE role-plays for real-world communication. Yüzlü and Dikilitaş (2022) used asynchronous Canvas discussions and English debates to enhance criticality. Hanna et al. (2022) implemented START's Skype sessions, where learners negotiated meanings in Arabic and English. In the PCL 100 module, tutors facilitated student-led discussions in isiXhosa and Afrikaans. Peer-led study groups, such as Excel mock lessons, achieved an 80 per cent distinction rate, reflecting agency within ADDIE's structured framework (Ellery & Baxen, 2015). This phase ensures that translanguaging bridges linguistic gaps and empowers learners.

The insights gained during implementation naturally lead into the evaluation phase, where the effectiveness of translanguaging strategies can be critically assessed. By reflecting on learner engagement, achievement, and feedback, a lecturer can determine which approaches truly support equitable learning and where adjustments are needed (Sadigzade, 2025). The evaluation phase uses ADDIE to assess the effectiveness of translanguaging holistically. Shao (2024) utilised bilingual feedback in BE contexts. Yüzlü and Dikilitaş (2022) employed Turkish reflective papers to capture critical insights: Hanna et al. (2022) leveraged surveys, tests, and Skype observations for iterative refinement. In the PCL 100 module, Moodle's activity tracking and personalised emails (e.g. "You are falling behind on Excel tasks") encouraged agency, countering deficit discourses (Ellery & Baxen, 2015). Multilingual assessments valued learners' linguistic identities, aligning with Rajendram's (2023) equity-focused pedagogy. ADDIE's evaluation ensures that translanguaging enhances epistemic access and informs design improvements. I advocate for using the evaluation phase not merely as a measurement tool but as a reflective practice that informs continuous improvement.

Integrating translanguaging requires humility to address students' diverse contexts in basic computing fundamentals, as du Preez and le Grange (2020) advocated. A blended model, combining face-to-face and online modalities, mitigated inequalities of fully online settings, promoting inclusion (du Preez & le Grange, 2020). These principles underscore that equitable digital education requires intentional design, not ad-hoc interventions. As Law et al. (2018) noted, addressing digital disparities demands tailored pedagogies that account for diverse competencies.

Conclusion

To address how computing education can foster inclusion amidst intersecting digital and linguistic barriers, the redesign of the basic computing curriculum demonstrates that intentional pedagogical strategies, such as translanguaging and the ADDIE model, can transform learning spaces. By integrating isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English through translated resources and peer-led multilingual discussions, the module empowered students to engage with technology in their linguistic and cultural contexts, fostering epistemic access and agency. This approach counters exclusion by valuing students' identities and addressing disparities rooted in South Africa's historical inequities. However, persistent challenges like software limitations underscore the need for ongoing advocacy and resource investment to sustain inclusive digital education.

Reflecting on the process of reimagining the PCL 100 module at Nelson Mandela University, I became aware of the distance between my history with technology and the realities my students face. Growing up, computers were part of my world and technology felt natural to me, but lecturing in the Eastern Cape has shown me how rare that experience is for many. My students, especially those from rural or under-resourced communities, often encounter computers for the first time at university, navigating new tools and a language—English—that can feel like another barrier. This contrast has been a reckoning, pushing me to see digital education as a skill set to teach, and as a space to confront more profound inequities.

Reworking the module with the ADDIE model meant grappling with those inequities head-on. Bringing in translanguaging, letting students use isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English fluidly, was not just about making lessons accessible; it was about validating who my students are. From translated study guides to peer discussions in home languages, the module became a place where students could engage with tech on their terms. I saw it in moments like the peer-led Excel sessions. That kind of ownership, that spark of agency, showed me what is possible when education meets students where they are. However, it was not seamless.

Teaching this module has changed how I see myself as an educator. I am not just passing on technical know-how; I am trying to create a space where students can question, create, and claim technology as their own. Once a point of pride, my comfort with digital tools now feels like a responsibility to question: "Who is left out when we talk about 'digital natives'?" "How do we make tech a tool for justice, not exclusion?" Moving forward, I want to keep pushing: more student-driven content, advocacy for resources, and ways to weave linguistic and cultural identity into learning. The goal is not just to teach computing but to help students see themselves as shapers of a digital world, ready to challenge its barriers and build a more equitable future.

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Theorising Views of Bilingual/Multilingual Undergraduate Students on English-Medium Policy at a University in South Africa⁸

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Abstract

Since 1994, South African higher education has been grappling with a complex interplay of curriculum transformation demands, multilingualism, the language question, decolonial imperatives, and re-definition of higher education in the country. These overlapping complexities have seen the sector shifting to innovative research that seeks to guide meaningful change. The discourse of the language question is central in research linked to dismantling Western orientated policies in South African higher education. It is largely skewed against monolingual, monoglossic and anglonormative ideologies. Despite policy directive calls for the adoption of Indigenous languages for teaching and learning, English, and Afrikaans, in some instances, continue to enjoy the role of primary medium of teaching and learning. Thus, research based on the language discourse in Africa and South African higher education in particular is timely and relevant. This qualitative case study explored and theorised the views of 12 bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students, purposively selected in the faculty of education of a historically White university, on the English policy adopted at the institution. Bourdieu's social and cultural reproduction theory was used to inform the study and frame data analysis. Data were gathered from the participants through semi-structured individual, face-to face-interviews. Data analysis adopted Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure. Findings illuminated that although the role of English is acknowledged, it diminishes effective learning for some bilingual/multilingual students who encounter English-medium policy as a barrier to learning. It is recommended that such students be supported in their learning through the use of Indigenous languages as mediums of instruction.

Key words: African indigenous languages, medium of instruction, multilingualism, English hegemony, social and cultural reproduction theory, South African higher education

Introduction

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Introduction

Many education systems worldwide, privilege English as the language of teaching and learning. This highlights the spread of English and its dominance in the education sector, threatening the existence and use of local and marginalised languages (Ntombela, 2023; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010). One of the biggest educational key challenges in contemporary multilingual higher education contexts in Africa is the choice of language of teaching (Norro, 2021). In Africa, colonialism brought European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese, which dominate the linguistic landscape with English being the most dominant and ever expanding language (Phillipson, 2012). According to Eurocentric ontology, knowledge accessed through the English language is prioritised and legitimated, while other languages, especially the Global South Indigenous languages are trivialised. This has drawn attention to the hegemony of English and its impact on bilingual/multilingual student achievement and access to quality education in higher education systems where English is used as the language of teaching, learning, and assessment (Ndimande-Hlongwa & Ndebele, 2017).

Although territorial colonisation has ended in Africa, coloniality and hierarchisation of language is commonplace in higher education pedagogical practices. Language policies in use in the sector are dominated by English (Knight, 2013; Ndlovu- Gatsheni, 2018; Prah, 2018), yet bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students generally lack English competence. The South African Constitution (Madondo, 2023; Republic of South Africa, 1996) gave nine African languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati, Pedi, Tswana, isiNdebele, Sesotho, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda) equal status to English and Afrikaans, along with Sign Language, which was recognised as an official language in May 2023 (Madondo, 2023).

As part of the measures to promote South African Indigenous languages, an initiative was made in 2012 “to determine the development of African languages as intellectual languages in higher Education” (Munyaradzi, 2024, p. 5). In response to the recommendations by the committee that looked into the issue of the development of African languages in teaching and learning, a subsequent report (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015) highlighted that there was very little progress noticeable in promoting African languages to enhance access and success in South African higher education. Furthermore, the Fallist campaigns of 2015/2016 broadened the scope of unhappiness with language of instruction policies (Mavunga, 2019), especially at historically White universities.

The expectation that students should exhibit competence in the language of teaching and learning, especially one that significantly differs from their home languages is a linguistic mismatch. This mismatch raises critical questions, and has been consistently linked to under-achievement and high dropout and failure rates (Council on Higher Education, 2016; Cummins, 2010; DHET, 2020). This paper foregrounds that the crux of the language question is centred on its role as a knowledge acquisition tool. Where the tool is inadequately mastered, it stops to facilitate learning and becomes a learning barrier impeding equity of access and widening systemic inequalities.

After the release of the language policy for higher education of (DHET, 2020) the DHET instructed higher education institutions in the country to draw up language policies and implementation plans to promote multilingual education. It is commendable that there is remarkable progress in most, if not all, universities in South Africa where African languages have been advancing (Munyaradzi, 2024). Nevertheless, South African higher education institutions continue to face challenges in trying to ensure the development of multilingual environments that accommodate all official South African languages, especially the historically marginalised languages (DHET, 2020; Madondo, 2023; Viriri & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2023).

Against this background, the aim and objective of this paper was to explore and theorise the voices of 12 bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students in the faculty of education from a historically White

University on the English-primary-medium policy adopted by the institution. The following questions guided the empirical study:

How do the bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students at a historically White university in post-apartheid South Africa view the English-medium policy at the institution?

What are the implications of the English-medium policy to theory and practice in the South African higher education?

Understanding the Historical Context

During the colonial and apartheid regimes in South Africa, policies that guided educational systems instituted both English monolingualism and bilingual policies that privileged only English and Afrikaans (Ndlangamandla & Chaka, 2022). African languages were relegated to the periphery as uncivilised languages that could not be used as scientific or intellectual languages of engagement in teaching, learning, or research. Since then, the symbolic power of English has dominated what counts as valid knowledge in higher education teaching, learning, and research, where Eurocentric science regards all other knowledges as unscientific (Shava & Manyike, 2018).

Research asserts that the imposition of English and Afrikaans on South African Indigenous people was detrimental to their African knowledge systems and ontological and epistemological orientations, which resulted in them experiencing brutality in every aspect of their lives because they were alienated from their roots, cultures, and identities (Madadzhe, 2019). To date, English-medium policies in South African higher education institutions still negatively affect the bilingual/multilingual students who use English as an additional language. English-primary-medium policy is a phenomenon heavily critiqued, especially in the Global South, as an instrument that reproduces colonial forms of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic domination (Ndlangamandla & Chaka, 2022; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009).

The legislative frameworks and other directives concerning multilingual language policies are guided by overarching national demands to recognise equal status for the 12 official languages (DHET, 2020; Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, English is marked socially as a language of trade and job prospects, and it is designated as the official language in most higher education institutions in the country for administration purposes, and international trade (Mutasa, 2015). At the social level, English is associated with government service, professional, and high-profile jobs. It is, therefore, the language of prestige and upward mobility (Dearden, 2014; Hurst, 2016; Ndimande-Hlongwa & Ndebele, 2017; Ntombela, 2020; Phillipson, 2016). English is also a gatekeeper at South African higher education institutions because it is an entry requirement for all first-year students at universities.

This paper problematises the hegemonic nature of the Eurocentric languages as exclusionary tools that continue to deprive bilingual/multilingual students who find English-medium policy a barrier to learning, access, and success.

South African Higher Education: A Multilingual Context

Larissa (2019) defined multilingualism as the use of three or more languages to effectively communicate. Similarly, Oksaar (1982, in Mbirimi-Hungwe (2024) understood multilingualism as any degree of linguistic ability arising from an equal command of two or more languages. In the South African contexts, statutory documents such as the language policy on higher education (DHET, 2020) outlined that multilingualism is the use of multiple languages by a person or members of the community. Given the parity of status of the 12 official languages in South Africa as discussed in the preceding section, critical questions arise as to why implementation of multilingual education remains an insurmountable endeavour.

Among the 12 official languages, nine indigenous African languages are not only associated with ethnic ties but also socially tied to African culture and traditional value systems that Western philosophies

and epistemologies mythologise as unscientific and inferior to Eurocentric ways of knowing and doing (Hurst, 2016; Ndimande-Hlongwa & Ndebele, 2017). Scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and wa Thiong'o (2009) vehemently countered Eurocentric worldviews that portray Indigenous knowledge systems in negative ways. Ntombela (2016), in "The Burden of Diversity: The Sociolinguistic Problems of English in South Africa" asserted that the hegemony and economic power of English enacts the deletion or erasure of South African Indigenous languages as valid languages of teaching and learning. The author of another study mourned the switch from mother tongue instruction to English as medium of instruction as a double-jeopardy (Ntombela, 2020).

Language Ideologies: Anglonormative, Monolingual, and Monoglossic Tendencies

Closely related to the discourse about language question in South Africa is the notion of anglonormativity. McKinney (2017) defined anglonormativity as the expectation that people should be proficient in English, otherwise they are considered as deviant or lacking. In multilingual South African higher education institutions, bilingual or multilingual students are expected to learn through the medium of English and demonstrate their competence and proficiency in that language according to the level of competence expected. According to Cele (2021), all the 26 universities in South Africa use English as the main language of teaching and learning. This is a typical example of a social construction that highlights the dynamics of how language, power, and race interplay—corroborating insights that apartheid legacies continue to permeate the post-apartheid dispensation. Research focused on views and voices of bilingual/multilingual university students is thus topical and relevant because it interrogates the role that English plays in the reproduction of inequalities and disadvantages regarding access and success. New forms of transformative discourses should be initiated to resolve the challenge of hierarchisation of languages in attempts to implement multilingual pedagogical practices in South African universities.

A grounded understanding of the notion of monolingualism is best established when analysed side by side with the concept of language ideologies, which is understood in literature as a network of belief and value systems about languages (Foucault, 1988; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). In writing about language ideologies, McKinney and Tyler (2019) asserted that a typical example of language ideology in South African educational contexts is the design and adoption of language policies that identify a single language as primary medium of teaching and learning. Similarly, sociolinguistics such as Canagarajah (2007) and May (2014) understood monolingual ideology as the ideal of naming a single dominant language for teaching and learning. Such an ideal draws attention to the problematic nature of monolingualism in multilingual contexts because it thrives on and fosters the hierarchisation of a particular language. Some critics of monolingual language policies critique the ideology's deliberate effect of defining languages as separately bounded entities (Nkhi, 2024). Other scholars (Mgijima & Makalela, 2021; Sefotho, 2022) asserted that constructing a particular language as a single object and medium of teaching and learning is a monoglossic orientation to language policy and practice. This situation could be addressed by adopting a heteroglossic approach or by recognising the value of all languages in teaching and learning, thereby offering a progressive means to disrupt the tendency to hierarchise any particular language as the most suitable one.

Despite the dominance of English in all the 26 universities in South Africa, Fort Hare University and Nelson Mandela University allow master's dissertations and doctoral theses to be written in isiXhosa, while at the University of KwaZulu-Natal they may be written in isiZulu (Diko, 2022; Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2021). At the University of South Africa, the language policy categorically states that master's and doctoral theses can be written in any African language provided that there are capacitated academics to supervise such programmes. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, isiZulu is also a compulsory module for all first-year

students in all faculties (Madadzhe, 2019). Although only a few examples of multilingual approaches have been described here, most, if not all the 26 public universities in the country have developed multilingual plans in which Indigenous African languages are used to scaffold learning. Anglonormative, monoglossic, and monolingual tendencies play out in the different institutional language policies that valorise English as the primary language of teaching and learning. The Indigenous African languages largely play scaffolding roles in pedagogical practices.

Theoretical Grounding

This case study is underpinned by Bourdieu's (1977) social and cultural reproduction theory, focusing on four concepts: social capital, cultural capital, linguistic capital, and symbolic power. The framework is suitable for this study because it clearly illuminates how language policies in multilingual higher education institutions serve the interests of dominant linguistic groups, and it foregrounds how that promotes social and cultural inequalities (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993).

Within the social capital spectrum, social actors equip themselves with different kinds of capital of varying magnitudes, and compete for resources (Shawa, 2015). Social capital indicates the possession of rare resources through connections such as family, friendship, or institutional networks (Bourdieu, 1990). Cultural capital refers to non-financial social assets that include immaterial/non-financial and embodied resources or assets an agent has, for instance, exposure to people, objects, styles of speech, dress, or practices that promote social mobility beyond economic means (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Mutekwe, 2014). In the context of an educational institution such as a university, cultural capital refers to the forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a student has that give them an advantage over others in the institution and in society at large. In each context, different classes of people possess varying abilities within these forms of capital, both in terms of magnitude and composition. Consequently, people from these groups can be positioned along corresponding coordinates within a given field. Bourdieu's theory emphasises that proficiency and competence in dominant languages such as English and Afrikaans in South African higher education teaching and learning contexts confers a social advantage to those who are competent in them, while those students who are competent in marginalised languages become associated with mediocrity and lower social status, thereby exacerbating cycles of exclusion and inequalities.

Linguistic capital as elaborated by Bourdieu (1977) privileges those who possess it to dominate those who lack it. In South Africa, and most African higher education institutions, linguistic capital plays out in the gate-keeping role of English. Only prospective undergraduate students who possess high linguistic capital through passing English at secondary education will be accepted into higher education undergraduate programmes that are taught through the medium of English. This scenario aptly captures Bourdieu's argument that a language is worth what those who speak it are worth. It could follow that if speaking a particular language is a means to participate in a social context and adopt civilisation, dominant Western languages of colonisers in the global higher education contexts spoken by Global South Indigenous students, staff, academics, and other stakeholders is to speak in one's own oppression—hence clinging to alienation.

Bourdieu (1977) further elucidated symbolic capital, which refers to the available resources for an individual based on honour, prestige, or recognition. In each social context, different classes of people have different abilities with all forms of capital. Bourdieu's notion of language as symbolic capital reinforces inequalities. It mirrors what Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021) understood as coloniality of language, which imposes linguistic hierarchies. The symbolic power of a language lies in the fact that proficiency in a dominant language (such as English or Afrikaans in South African higher education teaching and learning

environments) provides an advantage to students who speak it as their home language, particularly when it is also used as the language of teaching and learning.

Due to the English's symbolic power, symbolic violence becomes an imperceptible force for its victims, operating through processes of misrecognition, recognition, or internalised perceptions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Misrecognition could play out when students, staff, and other stakeholders perceive a language given high status as inherently superior. As a typical example, bilingual/multilingual students are likely to perceive English language policy as an exclusionary force in teaching and learning. However, it could be argued that, in doing so, they may inadvertently disclose their personal experiences and attitudes regarding the language of instruction. This disclosure could, in effect, reinforce the very linguistic hierarchies that the policies promote, benefiting those who subscribe to such forms of hierarchisation.

The symbolic power of English and Afrikaans can be paralleled to what Veronelli (2015) and Guzula and Abdulatief (2024) referred to as coloniality of language. In her article, "The Coloniality of Language: Race, Power and the Darker Side of Modernity," Veronelli (2015) explicated that institutionalised colonial structures continue to marginalise people from other linguistic backgrounds by positioning them as incapable of engaging with or articulating complex systems of thought. In the same manner, Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021) and Guzula and Abdulatief (2024) critiqued colonial frameworks that continue to marginalise non-Western languages and speakers as inferior communicators colonial structures Drawing from the research, this paper emphasises the relevance of language policies and research that critique colonial structures in mainstream multilingualism.

Bourdieu (1977) proffered a compelling framework, which helps to foreground the role of languages as symbols of power—especially when the role illuminates elements of monoglossic ideologies and belief systems in a single language perceived to be the only standard language that can dictate linguistic norms while marginalising other languages. This paper maintain that progressive academics and researchers who buy into the value of Indigenous languages critique colonial frameworks that continue to marginalise non-Western languages and speakers as inferior. The paper further emphasises the relevance of theoretical framings and language policies and research that interrogates colonial language policies in mainstream multilingualism.

Research Design

The study is focused on perceptions of bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students on the use of English as primary medium of teaching and learning. To do this, the study focused on a single and historically White university; it used a case study approach at particular historically White university unique in that during the apartheid regime, only Afrikaans was used as the language of teaching and learning at the institution. At the demise of apartheid, the university adopted a dual-medium instruction policy that prioritised English and Afrikaans as the only languages for teaching and learning at the institution.

The study adopts a qualitative case study design through an interpretive approach to explore and theorise the perceptions of 12 bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students on the English-primary-medium policy at a selected, historically White university in South Africa. This institution adopted an English-primary-medium instruction policy, following the populist student protest movements in universities across the country in 2015/2016, moving from a dual-medium policy in which English and Afrikaans were the only languages for teaching and learning.

Case study research design is one of the most used qualitative research methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). It was adopted due to its methodological relevance given that this study was centred on searching for meanings and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) about bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students' perception on the English-medium policy at the institution. This research approach was chosen because it suited the study's purpose of obtaining an in-depth understanding of

English-medium policy by focusing on the bounded system of bilingual/multilingual undergraduate students' voices at a post-apartheid university in South Africa (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sampling and Data Collection

The sample of 12 bilingual/multilingual students was from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Three participants were isiXhosa-speaking, two were Shona speaking (one of the Indigenous languages spoken by the majority of the Zimbabwean population), three Sepedi, two isiZulu, and four Sotho-speaking. The name of the university is not provided to protect anonymity. Prior to 2015, the university implemented a dual-medium instruction policy in which both Afrikaans and English were used as parallel languages of teaching and learning. From 2017, the university adopted a policy of English as primary medium of instruction in response to the calls for transformation raised in the populist 2015/2016 student protest movement in the country.

The sample, which comprised six female and six male second-year bilingual/multilingual BEd students was purposively selected based on diverse linguistic backgrounds and university level. The ages of participants ranged between 21 to 25 years. To protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. The researcher obtained the ethical clearance approval to conduct the study and also got the gatekeeper's approval to interview the participants in the institution's faculty of education. After obtaining ethical clearance to undertake the study, participants gave written consent; participation was voluntary and confidential and the right to withhold information or withdraw from the study without penalty was assured.

Data were gathered by means of individual, semi-structured face-to-face interviews that enabled the collection of in-depth data from a small, manageable number of participants. Each interview was 30 to 45 minutes long. The interviews were conducted in English, but participants were free to use their home languages in response to the interview questions. The researcher used two professional translators to translate interview responses that were given in languages other than English, to English. One translator translated responses in South African languages while the other one translated responses in African Indigenous languages from outside South Africa. During each interview, participants shared their perceptions of English as the primary medium of instruction at the institution. The interviews were held on campus and were recorded on a digital recorder; verbatim transcripts were made for analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, the study adopted Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework to identify themes or patterns in the data. The analysis aimed to describe both the semantic (surface) and latent meanings within the data. This involved looking beyond participants' direct words by reflecting on the data, linking them to relevant literature and theory, and examining the underlying ideas that could be further theorised to shape the semantic content. Latent analysis, in particular, provides explanations for surface descriptions by linking them to deeper concepts in literature and theory. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis entailed immersion in transcribed audio recordings to capture emotions and nuances; coding data, clustering codes, and development of emerging themes were used. Three major themes were identified from the data, namely, English as a barrier to learning, support for African languages in higher education, and English hegemony. The themes are analysed in the Findings and Discussion section below.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in the study, the criteria used included dependability, credibility confirmability, and transferability. The strategies that further enhanced trustworthiness were audit trail and member checking. The use of verbatim statements from the participants demonstrated credibility of the study. The interpretative paradigm, the intrinsic case study design, and the methodology allowed me

to construct interpretations focused on what the participants expressed. The evidence of data was kept as audio data from the semi-structured individual interviews and the notes written during the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the three themes that emerged from the qualitative investigation are interpreted, analysed, and discussed: English as a barrier to learning, support for African languages in higher education, and English hegemony.

English as a Barrier to Learning

University education requires students to read and write extensively, critically evaluate content, and make informed decisions about it. This challenges bilingual/multilingual students whose competence and proficiency in English is below the expected standard (Cummins, 2010). Participants found English as a language of teaching and learning to be a stumbling block to effective learning as borne out by these comments:

We often don't understand concepts and the jargon used by lecturers or when we read or try to answer questions in assignments and exams. We're labelled as failures. (Betty)

Many times, I get comments on my assignments that my English is poor and I should improve it. (Getrude)

My lecturers say content of my essays and assignments or exams lacks. Sometimes Professor say my English is poor. (Christina)

Findings above suggest that Betty and Christina have not yet developed their English proficiency according to the institution's expectations. The same findings suggest that due to their low competence in English, they are often stigmatised as weak students. This corroborates assertions by Ntombela (2018) and Moorhouse et al. (2023) that mastery of terminology in English is a challenge for those students whose English proficiency lacks the "normal" standard. It also appears that some lecturers who teach bilingual/multilingual classes lack the ability to teach the appropriate skills.

The participants thus possess a low English cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and consequently, they are disadvantaged and academically penalised. For such students, research recommends institutional support to strengthen their English academic literacy, enabling them to read with understanding, think critically, and express themselves meaningfully so that they are considered worthy participants in university learning (Ndou, 2022). Until they acquire the proficiency skills required by the lecturers in the different courses in their studies, such students are usually misrecognised and labelled weak (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The pedagogical practice of using English-medium policy at the institution may be understood as a form of capital that reproduces social inequality in which bilingual/multilingual students with low English linguistic capital receive dehumanising attention from stakeholders at the institution who fetishise English and its symbolic value. From a Bourdieu perspective, teaching and learning through the medium of English may be understood as a way that reproduces social inequalities in the teaching and learning practices. Universities in South Africa have made strides to provide literacy support through literacy courses offered at various literacy and language centres (Ndou, 2022). While such initiatives are commendable, that may not be enough support. South African higher education could adopt transformative translation tools that would greatly foster increased academic success for its multilingual classroom environments.

Furthermore, the participants expressed their lack of confidence when using English as a primary language of instruction. They become demoralised during presentations or discussions in lectures or tutorials and disengage from learning. Bilingual/multilingual students with low English linguistic capital will often avoid ridicule through non-participation. These statements substantiate that finding:

I usually lose interest in most lectures because I become lost and I am unable to express my thought so I withdraw. (Elfanos)

I get scared to speak broken English in the presence of those who know it. I did tell them I won't participate in class. (George)

Those who come from best schools, they laugh at us wa bona [you see] when we struggle with grammar or talk smooth English. (Anna)

The findings are in tandem with those of Brock-Utne (2012) in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and Kamwendo et al. (2014) and Ntombela (2018) in the South African contexts that when students fear embarrassment, they remain silent. Bilingual/multilingual students need secure learning environments where they feel free to engage. Lecturers and academics should provide students with opportunities to discuss content in their various home languages in order to ensure effective learning. Students' frustration leads to bitterness and a sense of worthlessness. Lack of participation during teaching and learning processes among English second-language students illuminates their lack of the expected English linguistic capital, which inhibits confidence and effective interactions between students as peers, and students and those who teach them. Tailored support from lecturers and university language centres can help mitigate challenges faced by English second-language students, enabling them to access higher education more easily.

Support for African Languages in Higher Education

The participants also expressed the desire that African languages to be used as languages of teaching and learning and, if possible, as the primary medium to ensure effectiveness. These statements illustrate the point:

Handouts or module content in which concepts and topics are simplified in our different home languages will be motivate us to understand and perform better in our studies. More students passing, the better our country. (Gilbert)

If it was possible this varsity can use the official languages for the benefit of every student whose home language is not English. (Mpho)

Use of home language, very good one. Most South Africans can understand more than two languages. So it's easier for many to understand better then we pass and become better. (Clara)

Thus, participants aligned with Ndimande-Hlongwa and Ndebele's (2017) proposal that African languages be used for teaching and learning to support English second-language students in higher education. However, the use of Indigenous languages to scaffold learning should not be regarded as a permanent solution to the language question (Magwa & Magwa, 2015; Ngwaru, 2013).

Although the adoption of African languages for teaching, learning, and research represents decolonisation of the curriculum in that other languages are used alongside English to facilitate learning, that is not enough. National development in African countries cannot be completely realised without a greater use of African languages as primary medium of teaching and learning in pursuit of social, cultural, artistic, and scientific change. Efforts to intellectualise African languages have already been made with isiZulu at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, isiXhosa at University of Western Cape, University of Cape Town, and Nelson Mandela University (Ndimande-Hlongwa & Ndebele, 2017), to mention a few.

It should be highlighted that apart from language being a *modus operandi* in communication, it is also a mechanism of power (Bourdieu, 1990) in a South African linguistic field in which English prevails over the other South African official languages. The fact that learning and assessment materials are in English shows that the institutional language policy perpetuates the dominance of English language culture, underscoring its symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993), which is detrimental to the scientific advancement of the Indigenous languages in South Africa, and Africa at large. Adopting Indigenous

languages as mediums of teaching, learning, and research significantly enhances epistemic access and supports their development as instruments of knowledge production.

English Hegemony

The participants however acknowledged that English was a prestigious language that promotes social mobility and job prospects. Their responses also illustrated the hegemony of English in South Africa and worldwide:

English is a prestigious language. You have to know English to be regarded as an educated person, yeah, I believe that. (Eveline)

Look here, if you don't have a Level 4 for English on Matric certificate they don't take such people at universities here in South Africa. (John)

I think everyone knows that employers hire people with good English grade not only in South Africa but across the globe. (Godwin)

Participants further showed that they submitted to the hegemonic power of English as a result of their significant others such as parents, guardians, teachers, and lecturers who socialise students into the colonial discourses that maintain English as an indispensable language, superior to all other languages in a neoliberal world. The following statements demonstrate this:

Our parents, guardians and grannies say to me, I have to know English if I want to fit in society. (Betty)

No matter what, we as students here know that English is a language used for communication by many people in the world. Yeah, so it is a powerful language. (Peter)

So this English makes it possible for people from different countries to communicate. So we don't have a choice but to use English. (Clara)

Participants' views echo parental beliefs about the value of English and the notion of what it means to be educated (Mutasa, 2015). They feel compelled to acquire English proficiency due to its function as a global and local lingua franca, despite the challenges they face in learning through English as medium (Wildsmith-Cromarty et al., 2022). Because of English symbolic power, academics, lecturers, and students' significant others who received colonial education, may not realise the value of Indigenous languages and how they could be developed to become languages of teaching, learning, and research.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings confirmed that English-medium policy is a barrier to effective learning for most bilingual/multilingual students despite their conscious knowledge of the economic value of English as a prestigious language that would promote their ability to be globally competitive. Therefore, it is recommended that African languages be used as medium of instruction in higher education. A multilingual approach could be implemented in the setting of examinations to scaffold learning. It is also important that academics in various institutions across the continent conduct collaborative research to improve the use of African languages as medium of instruction. Finally, the government should upgrade poorly resourced primary and secondary schools so that disadvantaged learners receive proactive language support before they enrol in higher education.

This study employed a qualitative research approach to elicit in-depth views of undergraduate students on the English-medium policy at a university in post-apartheid South Africa through individual, semi-structured interviews. Additional insights into the problem researched could be explored through adoption of other research approaches, such as mixed methods research, and different data gathering techniques.

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South African Universities at a Crossroads: The Imperialist Global Knowledge Economy as a Barrier to Multilingual Higher Education

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Abstract

There are several global, regional, and local policies on the promotion of inclusive and equitable education in Africa. However, African universities in general and South African universities in particular, are at a crossroads 30 years into democracy due to the dominance of English as the language of research, teaching, and learning in higher education. English is used as the dominant language of science, research, epistemological pedagogy, and embodiment of knowledge. In this study, I examine how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy have contributed to marginalising Indigenous languages in South African universities, thereby constraining multilingual higher education. South African universities' over reliance on English has hierarchised languages in ways that relegate Indigenous languages to the periphery. South African higher education is at a crossroads because on one hand, the global knowledge economy characterises universities as marketplaces whereas on the other hand, student movements demand transformation and decolonisation. In this paper, I employ a critical discourse analysis (CDA)–social justice frameworks to review the vision and mission statements and institutional language policies of a South African historically Black university, historically White university, and a university of technology. The CDA–social justice frameworks approach unmask the deeply institutionalised global market competitive posture of universities, and unravels the social injustices. A key finding is that the imperialist global knowledge economy is a barrier to multilingual higher education.

Keywords: decolonisation, English language, South African languages, South African universities, transformation

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Introduction

The post-colonial African university, like South African universities, has been accused by students of promoting coloniality under the guise of providing them with education, skills, and knowledge (Ndlovu, 2018). This means that the colonial master's language remains the dominant language in African universities, long after the nations gained their independence. Language is central from a social and epistemic access perspective. Its significance cannot be downplayed. However, colonial conquest and its influence in Africa and other parts of the Global South entrenched a hierarchy of languages. In their study on the epistemic access and success challenges in South Africa, Themane & Mabasa (2022) lamented that increase in access to higher education has not been matched by student academic success. Mzangwa (2019) further observed that the National Plan on Education (National Planning Commission, 2012) has not provided material benefits for most previously disadvantaged Black students in terms of access, equity, and participation in higher education.

One barrier to transformation in higher education, given the unequal and multilingual nature of the South African society, is the dominance of English as language of instruction. Mthembu (2024)'s study explored the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance of first-year public relations diploma students at a South African university of technology (UoT). That author found that many of the students who were not proficient in English, the language of teaching and learning, displayed poor academic performance. The ongoing challenge of multilingualism in South African higher education (SAHE) provides insight on the nature, character, and architecture of the curricula.

The Council on Higher Education (2025, p. 9) reported that "curriculum architecture reflects how teaching and learning are structured, organised, weighted and assessed within the defining parameters of the university and external regulatory environment." In this article, in light of the curriculum challenge of the dominance of English, I pose the question: "How do colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy influence the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities?" I subsequently make the case that universities in South Africa find themselves at a crossroads in their time. There is limited scholarship that critically examines university vision and mission statements to reveal their neoliberal orientations and the discourses that marginalise Indigenous languages.

Universities are at a crossroads due to the neoliberal and corporatist logics of the knowledge economy, which characterise them as marketplaces. However, Black working-class students in South Africa demanded radical transformation and decolonisation through the unprecedented Must Fall movements (Baleni, 2025). Such competing narratives construct universities as contested terrains. Methodologically and conceptually, I employ a critical discourse analysis (CDA)–social justice frameworks to the language, mission, and vision statements of a historically Black university (HBU), historically White university (HWU), and a university of technology (UoT). The CDA–social justice frameworks allowed me to move beyond plain text on the reviewed institutional documents to conceive the emerging discourses and their implications on multilingualism. This enabled me to explore how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy have contributed to the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities and constrained multilingualism.

I have systematically structured the paper to guide the reader through the research process and findings. Firstly, I give an overview that establishes the foundational context and significance of the study. Secondly, follows a brief rationale on the research site. In the third section, I introduce the theoretical framework, detailing the key concepts and theories that underpin the study's approach and analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach, outlining the strategies employed to collect and analyse data. The fifth section presents the findings, offering a comprehensive account of the results obtained, followed by an analysis that interprets these findings in relation to the research questions. Finally,

I conclude the paper with a summary of findings, highlighting the key outcomes, the broader implications for SAHE, and areas for future research and policy development.

Setting the Scene: An Overview

It is unimaginable today to conceptualise Africa, or to research, theorise, and celebrate African humanity, unity, or history outside the colonial legacies that make and unmake our being as Africans. African humanity, like all other humanities globally, is characterised by cultures, values, and knowledge systems that are intricately woven together and expressed through the continent's diverse Indigenous languages and vibrant cultural expressions. Bamgbose (2011) asked why African languages have low status and restricted roles. In this paper, I answer that important question, which equally captures my mind. Bamgbose (2011, p. 1) bluntly said: "It is well known that colonial powers imposed their language in each territory they governed as the language of administration, commerce and education." Mzangwa (2019) drew on recent studies to address Bamgbose's question, noting that English is predominantly spoken and therefore, its usage as a language of instruction becomes a rational option compared to multilingualism, which is seen as unaffordable to implement.

Tabé and Emekako (2025) reminded us how the League of Nations divided Cameroon between Britain and France, and posited that the French system of colonial rule alienated the local population and created a sense of cultural and political disconnection. These scholars' assertion sets the scene for this paper, and illuminates the reader's appreciation of the foundational basis of this study, which is to provide a thesis of monolingualism from a CDA–social justice perspective. Tabé and Emekako further asserted that the French controlled the more significant portion of Cameroon, and pursued a policy of assimilation that imposed their language, culture, and administrative systems. Of significance, is an appreciation of the imposition of the colonial master's language in the critical systems and institutions of administration, commerce, education, and societal culture as also articulated by Bamgbose (2011).

Celestin (2025) provided an important historical context through an elaboration of the Berlin Conference's provisions (such as the "effective occupation") that formalised the domination of African territories by European nations without regard for African sovereignty. According to this scholar, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 led to the partitioning of Africa between European powers, which left a profound and lasting impact on the East African Community region (comprising Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda).

For this paper, I am interested in illuminating how the language question remains the epicentre of contestation in higher education using three South African universities. I elaborate on the sampling criteria at a later stage in the relevant section. Bamgbose's (2011) thesis that a colonial outcome is that African languages took a secondary position in status and domains of use is critical for this paper in that,

Of 53 countries, Indigenous African languages are recognised as official languages in only 10 countries, Arabic in 9, and all the remaining 46 countries have imported languages as official languages as follows: French in 21 countries, English in 19, Portuguese in 5 and Spanish in 1. . . . Additional evidence of the continued dominance of imported languages is the medium of education which remains substantially in these languages, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels. (Bamgbose, 2011, p. 2)

In a timely policy review of language in education in 20 years of liberation, Ramoupi (2014) made some important findings in relation to the South African context that are equally critical for this paper. The scholar argued that despite the post-apartheid Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) providing for Indigenous official African languages to be in the curricula as equal languages of teaching and learning, that mandate had not been accomplished. English and Afrikaans, which were used in the education policies

of apartheid South Africa, had remained the dominant languages in the curricula at the expense of the Indigenous official languages of South Africa (Ramoupi, 2014).

Cele (2021) noted findings of previous studies on language dominance in both African and South African contexts. He argued that the development of language policy for transformation and social inclusion in South African universities failed to achieve the ideal outcome through a lack of robust monitoring and systematic implementation. The call for transformation and decolonisation of curricula in South African universities has remained in the spotlight before and after the Must Fall student protests of 2015–2016 that called for radical and immediate change to the broader university system. One of the contributing realities to social exclusion in South Africa, as observed by Cele, is the fact that university curricula and forms of knowledge production are not sufficiently situated within the African contexts. Instead, they are dominated by Western worldviews entrenched in the use of English and Afrikaans. Consequently,

This has recently been further exacerbated by the implicit positioning of English as a main unifying neutral language in South African universities when new language policies at the University of Stellenbosch, University of South Africa, University of Pretoria and the University of Free State elevated the status of English in their language policies. (Cele, 2021, p. 29)

In view of this brief overview of Indigenous language marginalisation across the African continent through conquest and the elevation of English and other colonial languages as dominant languages in business, administration, education, and other domains of use, I now briefly shine the spotlight on the research site for this study.

Rationale for Research Site Selection

The overarching aim of this study was to examine how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy contribute to the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities, while also highlighting the need to advance multilingual higher education. The selection of a HWU and a HBU is deliberate, aligning with the study's aim to explore the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in SAHE. This is because the apartheid system operated on a racial divide with HWUs exclusively White while HBUs catered for Black students but used English as medium of instruction. This selection provides an opportunity to explore the level of transformation towards multilingualism.

Various scholars, including Mkhize (2018), noted that following the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, a bilingual English-Dutch state emerged, leading to the Department of Education mandating a bilingual education policy that made English and Afrikaans official languages. Mkhize further explained that the institutionalisation of the National Party's separate development policy resulted in ethnolinguistic enclaves, where universities were classified as White, Black, Indian, or Coloured. White universities were further divided into English or Afrikaans institutions based on the medium of instruction adopted. In contrast, Black, Indian, and Coloured universities predominantly adopted English as the medium of instruction (du Plessis, 2006, as cited in Mkhize, 2018).

This historical context justifies my selection of institutions from both of the colonially oriented university categories in South Africa. Additionally, the post-apartheid restructuring of higher education, including mergers and the establishment of UoTs has led to significant reconfigurations within the sector. Considering these developments, the inclusion of a UoT in this study provides an opportunity to examine the evolving language discourses in the context of SAHE.

Theoretical Framework

The SAHE landscape has been marked by persistent multilingual language policy challenges, notably the dominance of English and Afrikaans as colonial languages that tend to manifest into institutional social injustices. In this study, I was guided by the CDA–social justice frameworks. The frameworks enabled me to critically examine the colonial language and its hegemonic power beyond its mere usage as a medium of communication, to illuminate its mechanism of power, identity formation, and social injustices within SAHE. For example, linguistic hierarchy has marginalised African language-speaking students, leading to epistemic injustices of alienation and exclusion (Cele, 2021; Mkhize, 2018; Ramoupi, 2014). To critically examine the social phenomenon of the hierarchisation of language and its injustices, it was imperative to analyse key institutional documents such as vision and mission statements, as well as language policy texts.

Various scholars have significantly contributed to the engagement, development and expansion of CDA as a methodological and analytical framework. For example, Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000, p. 447) noted that “CDA emerged in the late 1980s as a programmatic development in European discourse studies spearheaded by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, and others.” They further highlighted Fairclough’s (1992) influential contribution to CDA by reconceptualising it as a social theory of discourse, and established a methodological framework foundational to this study. Fairclough’s three-dimensional model consists of discourse as text, discursive practice, and social practice, and remains central to contemporary discourse analysis.

Fairclough’s (1992) three dimensions of CDA which are widely adopted and expanded upon by scholars, are deployed to examine how texts from institutional documents such as mission statements, visions, and language policies convey meaning and perpetuate marginalisation and social injustice through ideological and hegemonic processes within universities. This CDA dimensional analysis is further subjected to Fraser’s social justice framework dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation as articulated by Thrift and Sugarman (2019) and others. Similarly, Lester et al. (2016) argued that education policy scholars have increasingly focused on issues of justice and equity, particularly relating to marginalised populations. This perspective resonates with my own theoretical orientation, shaped by my experiences as a first-generation university student. Reflecting on these experiences, I recognise the profound impact of colonial language policies on African language speakers, necessitating a critical examination through CDA. In the next section, I outline the methodological process employed in exploring this theoretical intervention of a critical social justice discourse perspective on multilingualism in SAHE.

Methodological Approach

Recognising that power is inherently embedded in language, both spoken and written, I employed a dual-method approach—the document review and the empirical narrative—to explore the multilingual challenges and opportunities within SAHE, using a case study design. The focus for this study was to examine how colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy contribute to the marginalisation and constraining of Indigenous languages in South African universities while also highlighting the need to advance multilingual higher education. Ridder (2017) observed that case study research scientifically investigates real-life phenomena using in-depth methods for individuals, groups, or organisations, for example, in an intrinsic case study approach, the case itself is of interest. This relates to my study because the case of how colonial legacies manifest in mission, vision statements, and institutional language policies to impact on students’ real-life experiences is of interest to me.

Document Review Method

Initially, I conducted a comprehensive document review focusing on institutional vision and mission statements, as well as language policies from one HBU, one HWU, and one UoT—all accessed from

the respective institutional websites. This review aligned with the study's aim of exploring the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in SAHE. Thus, these three institutions were a representative sample in view of the current key categories of institutions in South Africa. This selection helped me to examine institutional narratives and their alignment or misalignment with the social justice theory dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation. The review approach, as delineated by Saidi (2022), is a secondary research method that synthesises data from primary sources. Similarly, employing a review approach was particularly effective in summarising and reconciling diverse information, thereby providing a robust foundation for subsequent analysis.

Empirical Data

To complement the document review, I drew empirical data from a study I had conducted before (see Baleni, 2024). In that study, there were 11 student participants, three of whom were enrolled at the universities whose documents I analysed for this study. I gathered narratives of research participants who were either first- or second-year undergraduate students at this study's institutions during the COVID-19 lockdown period. These narratives offer insights into the lived experiences of students, highlighting issues of access, equity, and inclusion. The findings of the previous study highlight how participants navigated an online model of teaching and learning based on English as the medium of instruction, and complement the current review of vision and mission statements and institutional language policies that continue to be barriers to multilingualism in higher education.

Analytical Framework

I analysed data through a deductive application of CDA–social justice frameworks. CDA assisted me to examine how institutional texts constructed and perpetuated power dynamics, while the social justice framework provided a normative basis for evaluating these constructions in terms of equity and inclusion. Together, these frameworks enabled a critical assessment of how institutional policies and student experiences intersected to either challenge or reinforce existing power structures within SAHE. By using a deductive approach, I adopted an analytical framework that was guided by pre-established theoretical lenses of CDA and social justice, rather than letting themes emerge solely from the data.

Presentation of Findings

This section is divided into four related but self-contained sections namely, 1) insights from institutional visions, 2) the discourse of institutional mission statements, 3) a case study account of institutional language policies, and 4) a critical social justice empirical narrative.

Insights from Institutional Visions

These findings are explored in relation to the main research question: “How do colonial legacies and the global knowledge economy shape the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in South African universities?” To address this research question, for example, the UoT's (2016, p. 1) Annual Report captured its vision as “A preferred University for developing leadership in technology and productive citizenship.” The HWU's (n.d.) website stated that the

University's vision is to be an outstanding internationally respected academic institution which proudly affirms its African identity, and which is committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility.

The vision of the HBU (n.d) was expressed as “Our vision is to be a distinctive African university advancing excellence and innovation in research, teaching, learning, administration and social engagement.” The three vision statements of these case study institutions are branded by the logics of competitiveness and excellence—“preferred university,” “outstanding internationally respected university” and “a distinctive African university advancing excellence.” Vision statements are ways, systems, and

practices by which institutions express their mandates and purposes. This review shows that these institutions portray a drive towards international acclaim within a market-oriented logic of excellence and productivity.

These logics of competitiveness and excellence emerging from the institutional vision statements align with Hlatshwayo's (2022) criticism of the SAHE policy and legislative framework. His view was that both the policy and legislative frameworks of SAHE are neoliberal in nature and are mainly designed to reinforce market-oriented logics and discourses. I argue that the extent to which a university assumes the status of a preferred institution, be outstanding, and become internationally acclaimed and distinct from others in the areas of research, teaching, learning, and administration reinforces a market orientation and a competitive edge. Hlatshwayo qualified his criticism of the neoliberal logic entrenched in policy and legislative framework in SAHE by clarifying that beyond the neoliberal discourse being colonial, oppressive, alienating, and unsustainable particularly for scholars in the university, neoliberal discourse tends to manifest itself in institutional practices. Vision statements are forms of practice that give institutions mandates and forms of power to pursue certain ideologies such as reaching the destiny of being the premier hub of technology, explicit in the UoT's vision.

In the case of UoT's vision of being a preferred university for developing leadership in technology and productive citizenship, Mthembu's (2024) recent master's thesis paints a different picture from both a distributive and recognitive justice perspective. The poor academic performance of first-year public relations diploma course students (largely due to their non-proficiency in English language as a language of instruction, in Mthembu's findings) shows the misrecognition of Black students' mainly Zulu and Xhosa languages and cultures in the distribution matrix of the public relations curriculum. This defeats the notion of being a preferred institution from Fraser's (2009) social justice founding principle of participatory parity.

The Discourse of Institutional Mission Statements

Mission statements play significant institutional roles and, for the purposes of this paper, are viewed as carriers of the power to control, rule, manage, and decide as illustrated in the first set of extracts from the mission statements of the three case study institutions below and in the subsequent sections. Drucker (cited in Alegre et al., 2018) described a mission statement as a written declaration used to communicate the purpose of an organisation. Those scholars observed that mission statements are widely used in practice but poorly researched in theory.

Premised on this study's objective to subject mission statements to CDA and apply a social justice lens to articulate the challenges and opportunities presented by the following mission statements of the institutions under review:

The [UoT's] mission is to excel through, a teaching and learning environment that values and supports the University community, promoting excellence in learning and teaching, technology transfer and applied research, external engagement that promotes innovation and entrepreneurship through collaboration and partnership. (UoT, 2016, p. 1)

Our mission (HBU) is to provide quality education and conduct innovative research in niche areas, contributing to socially and contextually relevant knowledge with a strong emphasis on applying digital technologies. (HBU, n.d)

The [HWU] will strive to produce outstanding internationally accredited graduates who are innovative, analytical, articulate, balanced and adaptable, with a life-long love of learning; and to strive, through teaching, research and community service, to contribute to the advancement of international scholarship and the development of the Province and Southern Africa. (HWU, n.d.)

Important themes that emerge from the above institutional statements are noteworthy. For example, the notion of community exists in the mission statements, as university community for the UoT, community service for the HWU, and implicitly as socially and contextually relevant knowledge. To put this to context, this notion of community featuring in the institutional mission statements can be better illuminated by borrowing from Pearce & David's work (cited in Alegre et al., 2018) relating to recommendation of the key components that can be deployed to understand mission statements some of which are 1) the specification of target customers and markets, 2) the identification of principal products and services, 3) the specification of the geographic domain, and 4) the identification of the core technologies. This is understandably so because mission statements initially emerged as business models and entered academia in the 1980s and 1990s. On a similar note, the community is specified and targeted as customers and part of the local market however with an emphasis on the advancement into the international scholarly market for the HWU.

In this matrix of institutional mission statements, knowledge, which is generally bound by language, is identified as the principal product used to penetrate the international market and the university community. This does not conceptually refer to the physical location of the institution but is left implicit as a university community to be served by this principal product. On the above fourth dimension of categorisation of mission statements in respect to the identification of core technologies used to advance the missions, the HBU expresses that knowledge, as is its principal product, shall be produced through the advancement and application of digital technologies. Interestingly another HBU with a very broad mission statement includes the following excerpt in its mission statement on its website:

We enhance access to higher education for under-prepared, socially and economically disadvantaged students in particular and we provide academic support services to all students of the University to ensure success in their studies.

What is important to note is that although the mission statement is crafted as student-centred, there is stark difference with its language policy which states:

In terms of the current Language Policy, [the HBU] uses English as the medium of instruction except in African languages programmes and modules and one programme: Contemporary English Language Studies and Multilingual Studies. (HBU, 2021)

The Case of Institutional Language Policies

The National Language Policy for SAHE requires universities to promote and develop South African languages as academic and scientific languages (Theledi & Masote, 2024). Of the three institutions under review, the UoT had no accessible language policy, the HBU had a very brief mention of language in its amended institutional statute of 2020, and the HWU had its language policy for a while, and its 2019 policy is the latest accessible version. This language policy vacuum stands in contradiction to the vision and mission statements and, at the same time, acts as an effective institutional practice for promoting monolingualism. For both the vision and mission statements already outlined in the preceding sections, this policy review section, affirms the tensions between the pursuit of the vision and mission for international excellence, and the neglect of multilingualism in university language policies.

The HBU's amended statute (2020, p. 10, n.p.), in the sub-section Language Policy, reads:

The language of tuition of the University is English, except where a particular language is taught, in which event that language is also used. The languages of communication of the University are English and [Indigenous language stated] depending on the nature of communication and practicability.

The University is committed to promoting multilingualism and the academic development of the official languages of South Africa through its programmes.

Section 1.2 of the HWU's (2019, n.p.) policy document states that the language policy is predicated on the following principles:

The University's language of learning and teaching is English, and the University's official business is conducted in English; Creation of an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access, opportunity and success; Promotion of multilingualism and furthering the development of academic languages and literacies of the languages of South Africa where necessary and practicable; Creation of conditions for the use of particularly [Indigenous language stated] as a language of learning and teaching.

In this paper, I understand language as the medium through which hidden power relations are constructed and reinforced in the policy texts, and discourse as those specific ways in which language is used (Brissett & Mitter, 2017). In both the above HBU's and HWU's language policy excerpts, there is a discourse of subordination and erasure of South African Indigenous languages. English in both instances is elevated and described as the language of tuition. It is also used for conducting official university business for the HWU, and for communication purposes at the HBU.

Interestingly, the HWU's policy excerpt cited above constructs English as the supreme language and hides its superiority in an ambiguous text which states that its policy "is predicated on the principle of the creation of an environment where language is not a barrier to equity of access." The challenge with this policy text is that the historical and social context of the HWU is such that English has been, and remains the language of teaching and learning as well as language of official university business transactions. There already is language disparity both historically and in the current dispensation because teaching and learning, as well as all university business, is officially conducted in English, and the notion of equity is mentioned in disguise.

A similar disguise is expressed in the HBU's use of language in the text that states: "The languages of communication of the University are English and [indigenous language stated] depending on the nature of communication and practicability." Fairclough (cited in Brissett & Mitter, 2017, p.187) states that "CDA exposes how policies arise out of and are shaped by asymmetrical relations of power of competing discourses." The asymmetrical language power relations suggest that the choice of the language of communication depends on the nature of communication and its practicability. What are the chances that the local Indigenous language or any other Indigenous South African language would have an equal chance in practical terms to be used as an official language of communication or teaching and learning with English language which is the HBU's official language?

In another HWU's (2016, p. 6) language policy, the notion of practicability towards its implementation is vividly pronounced. The policy states:

The Language Policy and its implementation are informed by what is reasonably practicable in particular contexts. Relevant factors to be considered include . . . the number of students who will benefit from a particular mode of implementation; the academic language proficiency of the students involved; the availability and academic language proficiency of staff members; timetable and venue constraints; and the university's available resources and the competing demands on those resources.

What emerges as in the other three institutions reviewed, but more vividly, is that multilingualism is conditional and is downplayed by various human capital, infrastructural, and economic resources all beyond the control of students themselves. For example, should the university indicate that there was no

budget, the teaching of courses in Indigenous languages would not be implemented. There is therefore similarly no equitable access to Indigenous language use for academic purposes.

A Critical Social Justice Empirical Narrative

The concept of social justice has become increasingly common in education, with more education institutions integrating social justice orientations into their mission statements and practices (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019). The vision and mission statements and the challenges of multilingualism expressed in the institutional language policies have implications for social justice. Some of the empirical narratives emerge from the experiences of research participants who were students in these respective case study institutions in a different study.

A student participant (P1) who was an undergraduate at the HWU during the COVID-19 pandemic was asked a question relating to his teaching and learning experience at the time. He stated:

There was an overall sense of consideration, where a lot of learning material was made available and accessible. (Personal interview, April 2, 2023)

Another participant (P2), who was in Grade 12 in the first year of the pandemic and first year at the UoT in the following year, related his own teaching and learning experience at university:

At high school it was the first time to be introduced to the use of personal protective equipment and teachers were no longer audible [in] their masks. This worsened the following year at university because I could hardly hear lecturers who were English first language speakers whom I was exposed to for the first time, and it became a challenge listening to them in class and to their video lecture slides. (Personal interview, April 6, 2023)

P3 was doing her postgraduate diploma studies at the HBU and she narrated her online teaching and learning related experience during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown:

It was a matter of figuring out the new different technological approaches and platforms because different lecturers preferred different teaching platforms and as student one remained uncertain whether the class session was going to be conducted on MS Teams, Blackboard, or otherwise. (Personal interview, 02 April 2023)

The technological infrastructure in the country was or is still not ready to accommodate the various digital ways of teaching and learning and it made one remain uncertain if material would be delivered and class sessions held as scheduled. (Personal interview, April 2, 2023)

In reading P1's narrative above that the HWU had considered making learning material accessible, we need to go back to the principles of social justice in teaching and learning. Spitzman & Balconi (2019) helped us to do so by asserting that social justice in teaching and learning accounts for the power imbalances inherent in communication and the multi-faceted nature of identities of students so that they are all able to learn from the same curriculum. Although P1 mentioned that learning material was made available to learners, this study established that English was the HWU's language of tuition. Themane & Mabasa (2022) perceived access as more than a physical concept but as the creation of an enabling environment by providing resources. Thus, although learning material was distributed and made physically accessible (provision of digital gadgets for online teaching and learning), multilingualism was not used as an enabling environment to uphold social and justice teaching and learning principles.

The English-based tuition system of universities was lamented by P2 as cited above who found it difficult to comprehend English-based video course materials developed by lecturers who were English-first-language speakers. The video course material was a challenge from Fraser's (2009) redistributive social justice perspective. For example, Tabe and Emekako (2025) related Fraser's concept of redistributive justice

to calls for equitable access to resources. The monolingual nature of institutional curricula hindered equitable epistemic access for students, particularly Black students like P2, who faced a dual challenge: firstly, of navigating the barrier of English language, and secondly, of grappling with content-related challenges compared to their native English-speaking peers.

Universities adopted “online teaching and learning models which exposed the depth of digital divide and digital inequality among students from different socio-economic backgrounds” (Baleni 2024, p. 6). This was echoed by P3, who reflected on her experiences with infrastructure-based technological challenges, alongside the demand for basic ICT skills required for students to participate in the various online teaching and learning models used and preferred by different lecturers. Tabe and Emekako (2025) emphasised that Fraser’s (2009) notion of recognition refers to the acknowledgement of marginalised groups and their experiences. The institution, although historically disadvantaged itself, failed to acknowledge that its diverse student population was from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some were first-generation university students without any basic ICT basic knowledge or digital technological appreciation.

P3’s elaboration of the digital remote teaching challenges the HBU experienced during the lockdown, which left students uncertain if they would access course materials or get connected to online classes as scheduled, speak to the question of representation in Fraser’s (2009) social justice theory. Tabe and Emekako (2025) further clarified that Fraser’s social justice dimension of representation makes an emphasis on the importance of consideration of the voices of those marginalised in decision making processes. Similarly, there was no social justice representation in the digital remote teaching strategies for the accommodation of students who had no ICT skills or who had ICT-related infrastructural challenges to access internet services to connect to online classes.

Analysis of Findings

In the previous section, I presented the findings drawing from vision statements, mission statements, and institutional documents and an empirical section on the experiences of students at the institutional case studies during the COVID-10 pandemic. In this section, I was guided by the CDA–social justice frameworks, to interrogate how language is used, not merely as a medium of communication, but as a mechanism of power, identity formation, and exclusion within SAHE. I explored how institutional texts reflect, reproduce, or challenge broader social injustices in the context of multilingual transformation. The integration of CDA and social justice frameworks allowed for a nuanced interrogation of institutional language use, going beyond discourse production to explore how meaning is constructed around the challenges of multilingualism in what Hlatshwayo (2020) and Maluleke (2021) described as the unequal, fragmented, and intersectional SAHE landscape.

The findings revealed several discourses of injustice. The first key finding relates to the English-only orientation of all mission and vision statements of all the case study universities. This exclusive use of English implies a deliberate marginalisation of local languages, reinforcing the dominance and supremacy of English as the sole language of academic and institutional life, which reinforces similar findings highlighted in Mthembu’s (2024) thesis. There is a sense that what is meant by language in the institutional texts does not translate to the reality social of social recognition, representation, and distribution justice.

The second major theme emerging from the findings concerns institutional autonomy in language policy. While universities are at liberty to choose their language of instruction, depending on geographic context, this autonomy rarely benefits African languages. As Mzangwa (2019) observed, no subjects, modules, or courses (aside from African language studies themselves) are taught in local languages, even in institutions located in predominantly African-language-speaking areas. The institutional language

policies remain barriers of multilingualism in this context, as teaching and learning remain in mainstream English language.

In this study, this institutional autonomy manifested in uneven policy practices. Only the HWU had an accessible language policy. The UoT had no policy, and the HBU (2020) made only passing reference to language in its amended statute. This suggests that multilingual transformation is not a current institutional priority in SAHE. All three institutions reviewed were explicit that English was their official language of teaching and business. Furthermore, their mission statements reinforced a commitment to providing quality education and innovative research using digital technologies—again, framed entirely through an English-language lens.

This continued monolingual orientation undermines national calls for transformation and decolonisation in higher education. In practice, the push for multilingualism to achieve decolonisation and transformation remains largely driven by grassroots activism, particularly from movements such as the Must Fall student movements. As Baleni (2025, p. 102) noted, “the framing of transformation as a radical act of immediacy, as opposed to the politics and processes of gradualism,” calls for urgent, far-reaching changes to undo the marginalisation of South African Indigenous languages.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark revelation of these language injustices. It reinforced how the dominance of English continues to hinder equitable epistemic access, particularly for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The findings underscore that universities have not just maintained, but have actively entrenched a monolingual posture, perpetuating social injustice through the continued marginalisation of Indigenous languages in teaching, learning, and institutional identity.

Conclusion

The overarching argument is that SAHE stands at a crossroads, faced with a disjuncture between national legislative frameworks that call for transformation and the continued monolingual orientations of institutions. The dominance of English in SAHE has facilitated both self-preservation and the marginalisation, and in some cases, possible extermination of African languages in academia. The absence of a comprehensive language policy at the UoT suggests an implicit belief in the higher education community that Indigenous languages lack the sophistication required for science and technology and are, therefore, not viable for research, teaching, and learning.

Like higher education institutions globally, SAHE operates within a neoliberal economic context that promotes the corporatisation of universities. This global competitiveness, driven by international rankings, often comes at the expense of local cultures, knowledges, and languages. This study provided a foundational perspective on these dynamics. Future research should build on this baseline by exploring empirical dimensions of pedagogy, technology, and curriculum development, for example, to explore academic possibilities and alternatives that can be modelled to enhance non-proficient English speakers’ academic performance in English-based curricula. Such work should consider what a truly multilingual African university might look like administratively, globally, financially, and in terms of the composition and identity of its student body.

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Misconceptions, Misalignments, and Mismatches: Theory, Praxis, Policies, and Models of Language, Linguaging, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education

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Abstract

There are mismatches between ontologies of language and languaging, on the one hand, and language policy or language teaching, on the other. South Africa has a proliferation of policies in both the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training, with limited implementation and desired outcome, in other words, a misalignment of policies with curriculum. In addition, institutions tend to follow a populist and simplistic misdiagnosis of problems, and misconceptualisation of language and multilingualism and therefore perpetuate the mismatches of policies and implementation. Consequently, these policies have failed to achieve equity and social justice in higher education. In our view, this is a context where ideologically, language policy is influenced by a love for both monolingualism and multilingualism by institutions and government. Language sciences, such as sociolinguistics and the entire field of applied linguistics and linguistics were meant to focus on monolingualism. Language dialects and official languages are contested in post-apartheid South Africa against the historical unequal apartheid legacies of universities, which influenced them based on racialised laws and desegregation. The paper is underpinned by three questions: “What is a language?” “What ontologies/theories and models of language, languaging, and multilingualism inform multilingual policies in education?” and “How can Southern ontologies of language, languaging, and multilingualism promote equity, justice, change, and transformation?” In answering these questions, we draw on the coloniality and decoloniality of language and communication, and explore what it could mean to decolonise language and communication in a university context, despite the abiding and enduring existence of the project of capitalist neoliberal principles and policies governing higher education. For instance, the intersection of translanguaging, neoliberalism, and decolonisation seen in the historically diverse institutions of higher learning in South Africa militates against social justice and equity. Therefore, this paper argues for ontological models of language, languaging, and multilingualism for justice, transformation, and equity.

Keywords: ontologies of language, languaging, models of multilingualism, Southern multilingualism

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Introduction

South Africa is currently in a multilingual turn. Every person who is involved in education, including all stakeholders of language education, has opinions about concepts such as language, multilingualism, and language policy. These opinions may be academic or non-academic. Therefore, in a schooling and university setting, definitions of language and multilingualism should inform language theories, praxis, policies, and models of multilingualism when applied to the various types of educational institutions in order to achieve the goals of justice, equity, and decolonisation, among others. In the presence of a myriad of definitions, hegemonic Western voices tend to dominate. Exploring the ontology of language and multilingualism may help in delineating the trajectory of equity, transformation, and social change. Ndlangamandla (2022) expressed discontentment (including misconceptions) with mainstream views of languages, multilingualism, and transformation that are expressed through language policies and language teaching in the democratic South Africa, and invited further research. The following research questions are advanced in this conceptual and theoretical paper.

1. What is a language?
2. What ontologies/theories, and models of language, languaging, and multilingualism inform multilingual policies in education?
3. How can Southern ontologies of language, languaging, and multilingualism promote equity, justice, change, and transformation?

In South Africa, neoliberalism is mystified through politically correct terms like social justice, empowerment, decolonisation, and transformation. This is despite evidence that suggests neoliberalism manifests in the form of commercial values, competition, monetisation, and metrification (e.g. Knoetze, 2024). Therefore, policies that appear to be for social and public good are created without implementation while at the same time, perpetuating epistemic injustices and inequality due to misalignments, misconceptions, and mismatches. There is a need to interrogate concepts by expanding conceptual categories to embrace Southern theory. According to Makoni et al. (2023, p. 1), “Southern theory emerges from its advocates’ experiences and understanding of colonization and is empowered by the moral argument against colonization and its successor states.” Southern theory has ushered in a pluriversal understanding of the Global North and Global South. The term “Global South” has multiple geographic and geopolitical connotations. We use it to refer to the context of South Africa, which is still suffering from the legacy of both apartheid and colonialism, particularly for the majority of Indigenous languages. In the Global South, a Southern multilingualism goes beyond Western understandings of language, into non-linguistic matters, to bring about genuine change, decolonisation, and transformation. Reilly et al. (2022) described the situation in many countries in postcolonial African countries where multilingualism is acknowledged but not empirically evident in education. They advocated for a rethinking of multilingualism that should result in language policy implementation. Our approach is grounded in the ontological turn in second language acquisition, world Englishes, multilingualism, and language policy (e.g. Ortega, 2018). The paper is organised into the seven sections as follows: conceptualising language as an analytical and empirical category; models of multilingualism across basic and higher education and outside education; multilingual language policies; alignment and mismatches in multilingual language policies; equity, transformation, social change in a neoliberal and/or decolonising perspective; Southern multilingualism: limits and possibilities; and a conclusion.

Conceptualising Language as an Analytical and Empirical Category

Language is at the centre of human existence, human dignity, rights, justice, economy, science, decolonisation, transformation, neoliberalism and so on. Experts and non-experts claim “expertise” in language by virtue of speaking, studying, birthright, mother tongue, identity, and so forth. Once terms, words, and concepts expand or shift in semantics, there are bound to be contradictions, misconceptions, and mismatches in any application, especially an applied linguistics application of “language” that purportedly originates from what can be regarded as the source or predecessor in the discipline of linguistics. Before engaging with the focus of the paper, we preface the discussion with Fanon (a trained psychiatrist, widely cited in decolonisation), together with his teacher Aime Cesaire, will provide evidence of the uses of language:

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. (Fanon, 1967, pp. 17–18, cited in Singh, 2017, p. 70)

According to Fanon, the act of speaking is locational, and it carries the historical (colonial) pressure encompassed by language. The speaker is situated in time and space (spatio-temporal) and is also entangled with the power of language: “The colonized subject who speaks a language he has inherited by force comes to ‘exist absolutely’ for his master” (Fanon, 1967, pp. 17–18, cited in Singh, 2017, p. 70).

Aime Césaire (who was, importantly here, Fanon’s teacher) described his use of French as innovative:

Whether I want to or not, as a poet I express myself in French, and clearly French literature has influenced me. But I want to emphasize very strongly that—while using a point of departure the elements that French literature gave me—I have always striven to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage. In other words, for me French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression. I wanted to create an Antillean French, a Black French that, while still being French, had a Black character. (Césaire, 2001, p. 83, cited in Singh, 2017, p. 83).

Both Fanon and Césaire emphasised contextualisation and adaptation of what it means to speak a language in a colonial setting. They further presented an alternative view of how to name and describe the types of languages that emerge in contact zones, such as Antillean French or Black French. These views from what has come to be known as decolonial approaches help to clarify the research problem in this paper.

Language theorisation must be applicable to solving and/or analysing language problems in higher education. In South Africa, English was introduced through settler colonialists, and several scholars have attributed this to the continuation of the coloniality of English (Hurst-Harosh, 2015; Ndlangamandla, 2024). The continuing use of English as a medium of instruction in South Africa is contrary to multilingual language policies. Moreover, language acts as a barrier to some of the educational goals, therefore language leads to epistemic injustices in higher education (Ndlangamandla, 2024). A form of multilingualism with English is gaining ground in South African higher education. Yet various issues have led to misconceptualisation, misalignments, and mismatches resulting in the failure to implement multilingualism through language policies. We therefore propose an ontological shift through raising the questions: “What is language?” “Or, what is its nature?”

These are ontological questions that are ignored by many professionals in applied linguistics and yet they (applied linguists and non-applied linguists, alike) teach language, assess language, implement language policies, and research language acquisition. Ortega (2018) explored how both second language acquisition and World Englishes have been preoccupied with essentialist ontologies for decades, starting from Saussurean structuralism (referring to Ferdinand De Saussure’s 1912 introduction) going onto Chomskyan generativism (referring to Noam Chomsky’s 1956 Universal Grammar), and many others. Examples of essentialist approaches to language are language as a system, language as a structure, language as bounded, and language as fixed. We also add Western universalism to this list. Decolonialising language, and multilingualism, will require a shift to non-essentialist ontologies. Ndlangamandla (2024) argued that ontologies of language have received less attention in the contexts of both monolingualism and multilingualism, in a paper that drew on ontological decolonisation and relational ontologies (e.g. Escobar, 2016).

Language planning tends to be based on language as a fixed and static code. Makoni et al. (2022) rejected the idea of language as a fixed code and an autonomous system; instead of thinking of language as an autonomous system, they regarded language as a product of communication activity. This is a radical view of language and communication, which has more appeal to Southern theories and epistemologies, integrational linguistics, and decolonial linguistics (c.f. Makoni et al., 2021). Pennycook (2020) asked ontological questions such as, “What is the relation between the instantiation of English as a static, fixed, tested, and taught subject and its flexible, plural, diverse, and chaotic use?” This question is in line with disinventing and reconstitution of languages (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Pennycook and Makoni were

concerned with the disinventing of Western categories and discursive metaregimes of languages and instead, invited a reconstitution of African languages.

Some scholars have made philosophical and empirical arguments that language is a verb and not a noun, and some even go further into the verbiage by using the construct *linguaging* (Madsen & Norreby, 2019; Swain, 2006). Both language and linguaging are worth an ontological excavation. Linguaging refers to a broad cover term for speaking, reading, listening, signing, and interpreting sign language, and “languages are products of reflection on linguaging brought into being by and through linguaging about linguaging” (Love, 2017, p. 117). Gynne and Bagga-Gupta (2015, p. 518) explained linguaging as the dynamic and social use of different linguistic features for creating and negotiating meaning, observing that linguaging “is both heteroglossic and chained in the sense that different linguistic varieties and modalities are employed and interconnected in the practice.” Linguaging and heteroglossia can also overlap (Gynne & Bagga-Gupta, 2015). Some scholars choose one or the other when investigating similar situations of language as a social practice.

Linguaging has been widely described from various approaches, for example, sociolinguistics, pedagogical, sociocultural, and dialogical (e.g. Dahlberg & Bagga-Gupta, 2014; Madsen & Norreby, 2019) and, in this paper, language teaching and language policy implementation in higher education. In language teaching, some scholars have considered the issue of “linguaging language” in language teaching (Madsen & Norreby, 2019, p. 4), and further used the notion of translanguaging by locating it in two opposing views—one from sociolinguistics and another in education. Such disconnection and dissonances could be said to be epistemic, that is, descriptive and prescriptive, or even drawing on the notion of centrifugal and centripetal (Bakhtin, 1981). Moreover, others have investigated linguaging without languages (Sabino, 2018). Views about linguaging were complexified by Pennycook and Makoni (2020, p. 44) when they maintained that linguaging practices can be divided into abstract and concrete language features. For example, they made a distinction between “first-order” activities and “second order” concepts, with “the first referring to real communicative activity, and the second to the kind of abstraction that leads to the naming and claiming of languages.”

The notion of linguaging in higher education has been featured in a compendium of chapters (e.g. Makoni et al., 2022), who argued that the:

Creation and development of multilingual practices in the context of institutions of knowledge production and dissemination play an important role in the problematization of the hegemony of English as an academic and economic *lingua franca*.

There is a plethora of scholarship on linguaging (Sabino, 2018), which has partly been caused by the global interest and the ubiquity of (trans)linguaging. However, prior to the onslaught of translanguaging, the concept of linguaging was already used in applied linguistics (e.g. Makoni, 2003). Our view is based on language as social action, as activity, as observed through social interaction, by drawing on dialogicality and sociocultural theories. We draw on several scholars to support this view. For instance, Madsen and Nørreby (2019, p. 4) observed:

Linguaging as verb (rather than language as noun) signals that language itself is a practice and that exact meaning is not inscribed or encoded a priori in language but created in its situated use.

Such first-order activities include “a whole range of bodily resources that are assembled and coordinated in linguaging events together with external (extrabodily) aspects of situations, environmental affordances, artifacts, technologies, and so on” (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, p. 44). And in the second order, they observed that the main problem comes when:

We get this sequence the wrong way round and assume that language use is a second-order instantiation of the first-order things called languages, rather than understanding languages as second-order abstractions of communicative activity. (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, pp. 44–45)

Conceptually, these linguaging practices can further be theorised as belonging to abstract and concrete language features. Similarly, Anward and Linell (2016, p. 37) exclaimed:

We advocate a first-order (primary) level of actions/activities and languaging (signings, wordings, etc. for those who wish to have more verb-derivatives) and a second-order (secondary) level of utterance patterns but also abstracted linguistic resources such as signs and sign concatenations (words, grammatical constructions, etc.).

Anward and Linell (2016) argued that languaging is primary to the second-order language system. This language system is different from what traditional linguists have ascribed; rather, it consists of more dynamic linguistic resources.

Distinguishing the abstract from the concrete, Ndlangamandla (2020) illustrated the first order as the actual online language use, and the second order as the naming, sociopolitical, policy, policing, and so forth. He argued that the binary and dialectic between first order and second order is what leads to the mismatches when it comes to language policy and teaching through technology. However, this view has to be further interrogated; there is no clear division between first order and second order, primary and secondary, the two exist in a continuum. For example, Makalela and da Silva (2023) provided a Southern theoretical apparatus of ubuntu translanguaging based on the African value system of ubuntu—an interconnectedness of empirical beings found in the slogan: “I am because you are: you are because I am” (Makalela, 2016, p. 191). However, this view points to infinite and transversal relations of dependency between languages, and does not provide sufficient guidelines on measurability, actual practices, and implementation.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature on multilingual literacies and technology in the Global South (e.g. Martin-Jones et al., 2011; Ndlangamandla, 2023). Martin-Jones et al. (2011) described a critical, multi-layered approach to the study of language policy as the first special issue collection of papers to focus on literacy and language policy in multilingual and multisciplinary settings in the Global South. Ndlangamandla (2023) described a combination of socio-technologies, technolinguistic practices, and digital literacies as the mainstay of language and technology, especially in online learning where access and diversity are crucial. Studies of language policy must include multiliteracies. Therefore, the above debates on language and education provide an opportunity to investigate the models of multilingualism necessary for education to deliver on its mandate of access, redress, and equity while acknowledging the complex political and neoliberal context of higher education.

Models of Multilingualism Across Basic and Higher Education and Outside Education

Not many studies focus on models of multilingualism, yet models and frameworks are crucial in contextualising language policy implementation. Storto et al. (2023) argued that a model is an abstraction or a conceptual representation of how multilingualism should be understood, taught, practised, implemented, and researched. Very few studies on multilingualism in South Africa are of a conceptual nature (e.g. McKinney et al., 2024) and offer a model; a majority of scholars and “bureaucrats” are only jumping on the band wagon and using biases, idiosyncratic ideology, and in most cases, the neoliberal capital system, especially the translanguaging band wagon. Aronin and Moccoret (2021, cited in Storto et al., 2023, p. 5) described models as “forms of representation of the world created to explain and facilitate the understanding of phenomena that are usually too complex and multi-faceted to observe directly.”

In our view, how multilingualism is defined and understood translates into or impacts existing beliefs, including the monolingual bias, for instance, Aronin and Moccoret (2023, p. 1070, explained that multilingual individuals “have language proficiency that is not simply the sum of their skills in the several languages they have mastered or are mastering.” Therefore, Storto et al. (2023, p. 6) argued that this synergistic effect suggests that whole “multilingual proficiency” is always more than the sum of its parts. A theory of multilingualism, or multilingualism as a theory, should lead into a coherent model. Some theories of multilingualism may not be useful for language education and other decolonial agendas. Southern epistemologies have also weighed into this debate by appealing to sociopolitical concerns and social impacts of language in the Global South. Previously these contexts have been marginalised in the grand theorisation of Western linguistics. Ngué Um (2020, p. 110) made a viable argument that if Saussure’s mind had been informed by Wolof or Basaa (both African languages in Cameroon) worldviews, perhaps some of the dichotomies about langue and parole would have been postulated axiomatically, for example, by acknowledging that speech in many African languages is “a cognitive representation of the verbal experience like a fluid, dynamic and complex rather than a monolithic entity.”

The discipline of sociolinguistics has given less attention to multilingualism, and not foregrounded this because of being preoccupied with its methods. Reilly et al. (2022) described the situation in many countries in postcolonial African countries, advocating for a rethinking of multilingualism that should result in language policy implementation. This is because sociolinguistics and indeed, the entire field of applied linguistics and linguistics were meant to focus on monolingualism. Makoni and Pennycook (2020, p. 237) explained that many of the languages in South Africa, for example isiXhosa, have numerous spoken dialects. Abdelhay et al. (2020, p. 3) argued:

Any institutionalised choice of a linguistic variety as official medium of conducting formal politics and education has significant stratificational effects on the groups and individuals whose varieties are systematically excluded and devalued.

However, even when sociolinguistics is the focus, the fields of sociolinguistics and language policy do not always have a synergy (e.g. Bhatt et al., 2022). This has been identified as the dynamism of sociolinguistics in a languaged world (e.g. Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). In our view, technologies and language usage are exposing the weaknesses of top-down policies in South Africa, which tend to favour a limited version of multilingualism, or parallel monolingualism (e.g. Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). If sociolinguistics is fully utilised, any variety or dialect can be selected and, under the right institutional conditions, the official policy can be implemented, (Abdelhay et al., 2020).

Therefore, this paper concerns itself with both languaging and multilingualism as theories that may provide a conceptual model and a theoretical framework for teaching multilingually, learning multilingually, and doing away with English-medium instruction. For example, Liu (2018) observed that both language policy and English-medium instruction have a major impact on internationalisation of higher education to the exclusion of local languages, and including the failure of existing national language policies in South Africa.

Critical studies on language policy and language use question the relevance of advocating heteroglossia in educational and public policy contexts (Bhatt et al., 2022; Jaspers, 2019; Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). Jaspers (2019) called for some political justification of the selections that are made in the sociolinguistic realities, more consideration of values than facts, and a critical view of language policy against language education as a multiple/multidimensional ongoing relationship between policymakers and teachers. Teachers, or lecturers in the case of universities, must make choices about language policy. Makoni and Pennycook (2024, p. 19) observed:

We need instead models that question the very foundations that underpin such linguistic simplifications, research that looks at different ways of understanding language, that takes on board Southern insights about language chains, communicative repertoires, and the need to pluralize not so much languages as the notion of language itself.

There are several models of multilingualism that are European in nature (e.g. Dominant Language Constellation and Dynamic Model of Multilingualism), however, we call for more research on Southern multilingualism (e.g. Makoni & Pennycook, 2024; McKinney et al., 2024). In the Global South, scholars have warned against universal definitions of multilingualism: “the very idea that multilingualism could refer to the same thing in diverse contexts of communication is revealed as an absurdity.” (Makoni & Pennycook, (2020, p. 191).

There is a growing body of scholarship that seeks to depart from the idea of code-based depictions of linguistic behaviour, and highlight (trans)languaging, languaging as assemblage, temporality, and materiality of language through an ontological approach. Gurney and Demuro (2019) argued that both translanguaging and assemblage analysis are making a significant contribution in the ontological turn of language/languaging for particularly sociolinguistic and language policy research. Instead of viewing language as a code, they focus on dynamic processes, and practices that attempt to explain the complexity, materiality, and temporality of language. By moving away from orthodox views of language ideologies, they open a gap for language, communication, technology, and language policy—especially what continues to be labelled as English and multilingualism. They argued that language cannot only be viewed as practice. Instead, it can be practice, product, or other.

Multilingual Language Policies

Multilingualism is undoubtedly the organising idea in the understanding of language realities in South Africa. Its centrality in the South African Constitution is a departure from the bilingual language policy that characterised the apartheid regime (Matshanisi & Ntombela, 2024); its justification in the Constitution is legitimated by a project of redressing linguistic imbalances of the past. The imbalance was caused by the recognition of only Afrikaans and English in the bilingual language policy as the only official languages. The two languages were languages of the privileged Whites whose advantage has continued in perpetuity.

However, there has been a marked resistance by institutions of higher learning to adopt the aspirations of multilingualism as enacted in the Constitution. The obvious reason for that is the fact that institutions of higher learning are by and large the constructions of the apartheid regime, in which language played a pivotal role. In terms of language, institutions of higher learning in South Africa were largely divided into English and Afrikaans. Demographically, institutions were divided into urban and rural, where the rural catered for Black South Africans with meagre amenities compared to their urban counterparts. Rural Black institutions were aligned to the Afrikaans language, for example, Hlatshwayo (2020) argued that proper policies are still required to address institutional differentiation and fragmentation between historically White universities and historically Black universities.

The officialisation of the nine African languages alongside English and Afrikaans meant unequal development where higher institutions of learning opted for the status quo. The status quo was found to be convenient because it played on the aspirations of globalisation and internationalisation, which operate in the same way as the imperialistic colonial expansion. Therefore, both these languages (Afrikaans and English) are a gateway for neoliberal policies.

Social movements and protests have forced institutions to address transformation and decolonisation, for example, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in 2015. Events outside universities and social movements have challenged institutional language policies and often resulted in court cases. Court judgements then precipitate and propel language policy actions. Wu (2024, p. 4) asserted that “language policy is a metalinguistic practice (language practice regulating language practices), and that the regulation of language is entrenched within an ecology of extra-linguistic processes.” He further claimed that language policy rarely has language as an end but often rather, as a means to maintaining transgressing and creating societal boundaries.

Multilingual policies are precipitated by extra-linguistic factors, political changes, and constitutional imperatives, and they sometimes perpetuate historical inequalities of higher education. Nonetheless, lecturers and students have been shown to be agents and active in implementing innovative and transformative pedagogical approaches, for example, Mendelowitz et al. (2023) described theory and course design through language narratives and shifting multilingual pedagogies. They demonstrated how language narratives capture students’ identities against hegemonic English, and show agency through multilingual realities and intersectional identities of place, time, and sociopolitical landscape.

Alignments and Mismatches in Multilingual Language Policies

At times, theories contradict each other, do not fit social realities, and undermine the goal of Indigenous communities who want to revitalise their languages by, for example, translanguaging (see Bonnin & Unamuno, 2021; McKinney et al., 2024). For instance, there seems to be a mismatch between ontologies of language and languaging, on the one hand, and language policy or language teaching, on the other. Somlata (2020) observed that the continued use of English as a medium of instruction results in unequal access to education, high dropout rates, low academic performance, and therefore, the perpetuation of a post-apartheid unequal society. Heugh (2015, p. 281), in a special issue of *Language and Education*, expressed a mismatch “between what seem to be policies and practices borrowed from the north and realities of the contemporary south.” Kiramba (2016) described similar mismatches with language policies geared towards young children in primary schools in Kenya. Mkhize (2022) described these as fluid and flexible multilingualisms in higher education in South Africa.

The coloniality of language has been observed as a major instrument of colonialism and Western linguistic imperialism (e.g. Veronelli, 2015). Therefore, Chaka and Ndlangamandla (2025) called for Southern

multilingualisms as a counterbalance to Eurocentric and colonial nation-state views for framing and for theorising language. They cautioned against essentialising and romanticising terms like “African languages,” and “Indigenous languages” where these languages are not granted any recognition politically, economically, educationally, and so on. Such an understanding of language would require an ontologically Southernised view of languages and a Southern approach to applied linguistics (Hamid et al., 2024; Pennycook, 2023).

Equity, Transformation, Social Change in a Neoliberal and/or Decolonising Perspective

The history of inequality in higher educational institutions has never been resolved, even after the demise of the apartheid regime (Shaik, 2020). With its moorings on the Eurocentric logics, which thrive on individualism and capitalist orientation, higher education institutions in South(ern) Africa have not been able to unbundle themselves but have continually worked in complicit to promote the marketisation and capitalisation of knowledge at the expense of social change. The outcry of students to decolonise education has fallen on deaf ears, as administrators of higher education seem to have struck off their agenda the notion of decolonisation of education (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024; Ntombela, 2020). It goes without saying that the gap between the haves (in the form of historically White institutions) and the have-nots (which are historically Black institutions) continues to widen, reflective of the societal dynamics of the rich and poor.

What then is the envisaged social change in the neoliberal university? If a university’s current situation is the result of years of immersion in neoliberalism, its version of social change will inevitably conflict with the aspirations of society. Therefore, universities have been the sites of alienation for students, especially those of African grounding (Ntombela, 2020). Africanness has been frowned upon in universities as representative of barbarism; thus, the project of universities has been seen as a project of civilising, thereby alienating students from their African cultural heritage. Language has been and continues to be at the centre of marginalising African students. That is, in a neoliberal arrangement, English continues to be the default language with economic cache, regardless of its dehumanising outcomes as barrier to epistemic access for the majority.

Therefore, the mandate to transform remains elusive for universities sold to a neoliberal arrangement. Part of that lies in the fact that universities, previously and now, remain sites of protest for students whose representation is obscured within the capitalist foundation of institutions. Institutions under a neoliberal system operate with a managerial hierarchical top-down system that mutes the voices of the subordinate and subaltern. Consequently students, as well as academics, are only seen as implementers of policies that descend from those who executively run institutions—and the whole idea of knowledge engagement, critique, and thinking is dismissed as insubordination, rebellion, and antagonistic. Thus, institutions are only seen as companies that must churn out the graduate product in terms and conditions laid out by executives who must also toe the line marked by regulators, watchdogs, government, and donors. Graduates must, in turn, satisfy the needs of the markets—even if such needs are alien to self and society.

Southern Multilingualism: Limits and Possibilities

Although there has been historical denial of multilingualism as the reality in linguistic societies, due to the Western notion of organising nation-states in singular languages, nations in the Global South lived with multilingualism for centuries (Probyn, 2019). Whilst multilingualism has been approached from a problematic orientation, seen as a disturbance from a singular language establishment, it continues to be seen as a resource by various communities in the Global South (Ngubane & Ntombela, 2024). In fact, linguistic diversity and cultural multiplicity are phenomena that are celebrated in the Global South. Nonetheless, the education system the world over continues to be hinged on Western notions of civilisation and ethos built on singularity of thought and individualism (Ntombela, 2017). As a result, education is conceived to be the mastery of knowledge wrapped in a singular language. Because education was used as a civilising agent in the colonial expansion, the language of the coloniser continues to preside over all forms of knowledge to the extent that to know is tantamount to knowing the colonial language. Unfortunately, this obliterates the advantage of multilingualism if it does not involve a colonial language.

Notwithstanding such a complex situation, approaching multilingualism from a decolonial perspective promises to elevate marginalised languages to an equal footing with hegemonic languages (de Vos & Riedel, 2023). In South Africa, the Constitution has used multilingualism to achieve parity of status in all official languages including the formerly marginalised African and Sign languages. This of course has not been without resistance. Higher institutions of learning have often used escape clauses in the Constitution and language in education policy to maintain the status quo. Even with the new framework for language policy in higher education, there is reluctance to break from colonial languages as sole media of instruction—African languages are often conceived merely as pedagogical scaffolding, especially for struggling students. Kamwangamalu (2025) described escape clauses as those elements in language policies that covertly favour English in the country’s educational system—including student protests that call for the fall of Afrikaans at the continued increase of English, and at the expense of Indigenous languages. With time, nevertheless, and with the right decolonial tools, multilingualism involving only African languages should be a future reality.

Conclusion

This paper raises ontological questions and does not seek to reify categories such as “language,” “linguaging,” and “multilingualism” that have let down transformation and decolonisation. Reification, which is widely pervasive in language scholarship, creates the opposite problem. It leads us to assume that the things/practices/concepts we have named have a reality that precedes (and presumably persists beyond) the life of our empirical and theoretical explorations (Makoni et al., 2023). To dismantle monolingualism and assure in multilingual language policies, and attain the ideals of the South African constitution, there needs to be research, conceptualisation, ontological frameworks, and contextual definitions of multilingualisms—especially Southern multilingualisms because the Global North cannot articulate solutions for the Global South. A recent publication (Makoni et al., 2023) has proposed seven principles to develop models of language that are appropriate to a pluriversal world: 1) innovation, 2) animation, 3) transgression, 4) infiltrate, 5) elevate, 6) appropriate, and 7) population.

This ontological shift will require an ontological framework that can inform the models of multilingualism for future research and application. We are aware that there may well be very little of this happening in institutions of higher learning presently. We therefore, encourage these democratising sites (Soudien, 2024) to expand, infiltrate, and allow social change.

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Linguistic Repertoires in the Writing Experiences of Multilingual Postgraduate Students in a Higher Education Institution⁹

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Abstract

The linguistic diversity that multilingual students bring into their postgraduate studies, combined with the persistent dominance of English as the sole language of instruction and assessment at postgraduate level, especially in South Africa, requires urgent attention. This study seeks to critically examine the writing experiences of multilingual postgraduate students in a specific higher education institution in South Africa. Using Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, which proposes that language use is influenced by multiple-voice expressions, discourses, and power structures. This study explores how multilingual postgraduate students navigate and negotiate their linguistic repertoires while striving to produce writing that meets the high demands of academic discourse in English academic writing. Qualitative research methods will be adopted, utilising written feedback from students participating in the academic writing workshops for multilingual postgraduate students. Thematic analysis will be used to analyse emergent themes. Preliminary insights suggest that multilingual postgraduate students face challenges when navigating between creative and innovative thinking in their home languages and expressing their ideas in English only to meet the postgraduate writing expectations and standards. These linguistic tensions affect the academic success of multilingual postgraduate students. The study hopes to contribute to the development of inclusive pedagogical interventions that recognise and leverage postgraduate students' multilingual resources and their use to enhance overall academic writing proficiency in English.

Keywords: multilingualism, postgraduate academic writing, multilingual postgraduate students, higher education, linguistic diversity

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Introduction

The English language continues to dominate academic writing in multilingual postgraduate settings in South African higher education. To succeed in postgraduate studies, multilingual students, for whom English is a second language, are expected to navigate their English incompetencies until they produce a quality text in the language. Scholars such as Zhang-Wu (2022) regarded English academic writing as a gatekeeper of academic achievement and success for non-native English postgraduate students. In response to the undesirable power of the English language in multilingual postgraduate academic writing settings, translingual writing challenges monoglossic ideologies by viewing linguistic diversity as a norm, thus leveraging multilingual writers' agency (Canagarajah, 2013). In fact, translingual writing affords multilingual writers an opportunity to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire at various stages of their writing to enhance their writing (Song & Lau, 2025). Within the translingual writing paradigm, a deviation from the English academic norms is not viewed as a sign of incompetence but as alternative ways of meaning-making using their entire linguistic resources (Sun et al., 2021). There is a paucity of studies, especially in South Africa, on multilingual postgraduate students' writing experiences in an English monolingual higher education system. This study, therefore, critically examines the writing experiences of multilingual postgraduate students in a specific higher education institution in South Africa. It asks the two questions:

- What are the writing experiences of multilingual postgraduate students?
- How do linguistic repertoires of multilingual postgraduate students influence their writing experiences in a higher education institution in South Africa?

Writing in Multilingual Postgraduate Settings

Writing is crucial to postgraduate studies across all disciplines. It is through writing that postgraduate students showcase the extent to which they have grappled with the knowledge domains of their disciplines. In multilingual postgraduate settings such as South Africa, where most postgraduate students are writing in their second language, writing can be challenging and stressful (Cumming, 2013). This is particularly evident when their second-language writing is subject to evaluation and assessment. In their second language, multilingual students are expected to express high levels of creativity and innovation while maintaining mastery of the language of writing (Canagarajah, 2013). At the postgraduate level, good writing does not mimic and echo someone else's words, but it is a good dialogue—always mixing, changing, incorporating, answering, anticipating, and merging the writer and the reader in the construction of meaning (DeLyser, 2003). In other words, writing at postgraduate level moves beyond mechanical language skills into cognitive processes that are grounded in the writing process of drafting, planning, and revising ideas into a final product (Song & Lau, 2025). The major challenge is that multilingual postgraduate students are expected to accomplish all these complex writing processes in a second language to produce a good piece of academic text. It is under these challenging circumstances that multilingual postgraduate students realise that English competency is crucial; it is the “alpha and omega” for good writing and success in postgraduate studies. They feel that their home languages are not important at all and cannot assist them in attaining competent writing. However, van der Walt and Klapwijk (2015) were of the opinion that good writing does not mean that one must avoid or ignore other languages they bring into the writing process.

Researchers have been curious about multilingual approaches to postgraduate writing (Canagarajah, 2011, 2013, 2019; Cumming, 2013; Song & Lau, 2025) and their benefits for multilingual students. Song and Lau (2025), for example, investigated ways in which bilingual Afrikaans-English and Swiss-German university students utilise their home languages and for what purposes during their English academic writing processes. Their findings indicated that bilingual students generate their initial thinking

during the planning stages in their home languages, and translate those ideas into English at a later stage. Dong (2022) also examined dissertation writing of postgraduate multilingual students and found that the integration of students' multilingual repertoires enhanced their multilingual writing identity, improved knowledge construction, and supported writing process during brainstorming, drafting, reflecting, or discussing.

Cumming (2013) agreed that when multilingual students are empowered and made aware that their multilingual repertoires are a resource—not a barrier—they deliberately and strategically employ them to enrich their academic writing processes. Similarly, Canagarajah (2013) argued that for multilinguals to translanguage, whether they speak or write, is a natural phenomenon that multilingual students employ intuitively. Canagarajah further asserted that this natural translanguaging phenomenon of multilingual writers is often oppressed and suppressed in academic writing contexts where one language is dominant and students are expected to assimilate the conventions of a superior language and are even penalised for not adopting the writing practices of the “main” language. This study is interested in understanding the writing experiences of postgraduate multilingual students in a South African university where English is the medium of instruction.

Multilingual Approach to Writing

Postgraduate writing in South Africa is persistently English monolingual, despite the fact that most students in the postgraduate programmes are multilingual. Within the English monolingual and rigid postgraduate writing contexts, multilingual students' home languages are often overlooked and silenced in pursuit of imposing English native writing practices on them (Seltzer, 2022). Study of how to incorporate the marginalised multilingual voices of postgraduate students thus remains urgent.

A multilingual approach to writing, fosters linguistic heterogeneity in writing (Horner, et al., 2010). It views linguistic diversity in the postgraduate writing spaces as a norm given global multilingual realities. Multilingual approach to writing “empowers writers with the agency to shape their own language practices and challenges the monolingual ideology” (Horner et al. 2010, p. 10). From these perspectives, a multilingual approach to writing emphasises the fluidity of linguistic repertoires that multilingual writers bring to the writing process, and encourages them to draw from these multiple linguistic resources for meaning-making (Canagarajah, 2006). In fact, the multilingual approach to writing resists the monolingual approaches to writing acknowledging and appreciating the diverse languages that multilingual postgraduate students possess. Canagarajah (2024) argued that multilingual writing approaches decolonise conventional writing practices by embracing non-standard linguistic resources of students.

At the centre of the multilingual writing approach, also referred to as interlingual writing approach (Canagarajah, 2006), is the linguistic heterogeneity that focuses on the fluidity and dynamic nature of languaging rather than perceiving languages as rigid and separate entities. In other words, linguistic repertoires of multilingual students do not operate in independent compounds in their minds; instead, they coexist in permissible and collective ways. This theoretical view of a multilingual writing approach enables the multilingual writer to draw from a variety of linguistic resources at their disposal without relying on named languages during the writing process (Seltzer, 2022). According to Canagarajah (2020, p. 42), multilingual writing approach can be explained as “a synergy of meaning-making resources and a contingent and emergent process which transcends the traditional boundaries of languages, registers, modalities, as well as cultures and knowledge.” This implies that the meaning-making process of multilingual writers during a writing process is not restricted to a particular language, but is made possible by pulling together the assemblage of linguistic resources at their disposal, including those repertoires that are formal or recognised and those that are not.

In the context of this study, multilingual students are expected to navigate their postgraduate writing in English, which is the medium of instruction at the university. Academic writing support in multilingual postgraduate workshops is provided both virtually and face-to-face to assist students with their writing practices. This study therefore explores the writing experiences of multilingual postgraduate students to understand the influence of their multilingual linguistic repertoires on their writing practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by a linguistic repertoire theoretical framework. The key aspects of this theoretical framework include linguistic varieties beyond named languages, and the ways languages are used in society (López Ferrero et al., 2019; Oostendorp & van Zyl, 2022). This theoretical framework also acknowledges the fluidity and hybridity of linguistic forms, which are dynamic and ever evolving (Feltman, 2025). According to Oostendorp and van Zyl, the framework highlights agency and identity in how individuals uphold identities and negotiate their social positions, and the extent at which they control their communicative environment. The framework further underscores the fact that repertoires are not only cognitive but include social, historical, and personal contexts in the manner that people experience their languages (Busch, 2015). The framework includes concepts such as scope, which forms the social function of resources, and access, which has to do with the ability to acquire resources. These concepts link individual repertoires with societal multilingualism and the notion of inequality (Weirich, 2021).

According to Oostendorp (2023), the framework originated from sociolinguistics to account for the complexity of linguistic practices beyond a monolingual view of communicative competence. However, the focus shifted later to account for the theoretical concepts of diversity, hybridity, and fluidity in modern communication; the latest scholarship highlights thinkers from the Global South and challenges Western-oriented narratives (Oostendorp, 2023). The framework has been applied in education where researchers frame their understanding of multilingual learners in the context of diverse linguistic resources in a classroom in order to develop pedagogical approaches that acknowledge learners' repertoires (Feltman, 2025; Oostendorp & van Zyl, 2022). Furthermore, it has been applied in identity studies to provide a lens for investigating how individuals construct complex identities through multilingual communities (Feltman, 2025; Oostendorp & van Zyl, 2022). Weirich (2021) further asserted that the framework is applicable in sociolinguistic inequality in such concepts as scope and access that account for how societal structures influence access to certain linguistic resources, which links micro-level individual repertoires to macro-level social relations.

While research on multilingual pedagogy exists (Ngcobo & Roya, 2024; Ntombela & Mpherwane, 2024), there is very little examination of the writing practices of postgraduate multilingual students, and even less situated in the unique South African context where multilingualism is the norm. Thus, this study seeks to critically examine the writing experiences of multilingual postgraduate students in a specific higher education institution in South Africa. The goal of the study is to provide insight into the influence of multilingual repertoires on the writing process of multilingual postgraduate students in an effort to better support them at a university level.

Multilingual Writers

The term "multilingual writer" has come to be understood in a variety of ways in the field of academic writing. Specifically, this designation has often been assigned to students writing in English whose home or first language would not be considered English according to subjective observation. This term has thus become an umbrella term for "a body of students contributing a diverse range of writing perspectives, practices, and expectations to the writing classroom" (Alvarez, 2018, p. 342). In the South African context, however, multilingualism is the norm; nearly every student would be considered a multilingual writer. And yet, despite this, the majority of graduate work is expected to be produced in the English language.

The term “multilingual writer” is in itself problematic. Such terminology draws a distinction between multilingual and monolingual ideologies, and it places multilingual language practices on the periphery (García & Kleifgen, 2010). However, in the South African context, multilingualism is the norm, not the outlier. Practices based on a monolingual English imperative, therefore, present challenges in that they do not align with students’ lived or educational experiences, and are tied to colonial conventionality and dominant ideologies that elevate English over other languages.

Multiliteracies and Multicompetence

A multilingual (or interlingual) approach to writing approaches language and the production of language as a fluid process (Canagarajah, 2006). Multilingual writers inevitably think and move within the context of multiple languages, utilising the entirety of their linguistic repertoires when using language to complete a task. There has been significant scholarship regarding how such linguistic fluidity positively impacts the brain, particularly in regard to executive functioning (see Abutalebi et al., 2012; Barac & Bialystok, 2011, 2012; Bialystok, 2011, 2015; Kroll & Bialystok, 2013). Addressing this linguistic pluralism in academic writing is therefore paramount—both in the South African context and in an increasingly global world (Alvarez, 2018).

Multicompetence, a term introduced by Cook (1992), recognised the role of multilingualism in a sociolinguistic context (Franceschini, 2011). When defining literacy multimodally, the term can be applied to individuals who may be regarded as functionally literate in more than one language (Skerrett, 2013). Yet, despite their linguistic aptitude, the researchers of this study theorise that multilingual postgraduate students feel that their multilingualism detracts rather than supports their English writing, and thus impacts their writing experiences. The workshops utilised in this study were thus conceived to assist graduate students, not only with their writing practice, but to address the mindset of multilingualism being a resource, not a barrier, to elevated academic writing practice.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this study consisted of qualitative analysis based on workshop participant attendance and open-ended questionnaire responses. Eighteen questionnaires were returned, and responses to the two questions were analysed. Researchers identified and recorded the responses. Due to the relatively small sample size, it was possible to record participants’ responses verbatim. Nevertheless, recurring responses were recorded only once. There were two questionnaires: a pre-workshop questionnaire (Table 1) one with one question, and a post-workshop questionnaire (Table 2) with two questions. The pre-workshop questionnaire was meant to capture students’ expectations and motivation to attend the workshop, whilst the post-workshop questionnaire was meant to capture students’ experiences of the workshop.

Setting

This study took place at two campuses of a specific South African university. The first campus is located in an urban centre, while the second campus is in a rural area. The urban campus is decidedly more diverse than the rural campus due to location and the size of the student population (30,000 enrolled students on the main urban campus versus 3,800 on the rural satellite campus). Despite this, both campuses feature primary instruction in English, which is not the home language of the majority of enrolled students. Both campuses offer various graduate programmes in a number of different faculties that host both South African and international graduate students. These sites were ideal for conducting research due to the prominence of the university, the diverse range of graduate student participants, and two of the researchers’ affiliations with the university. Multilingual integration is also touted as a pillar of advancement at this university, aiming to support students across education levels and comply with national education policies.

The Researchers

One associate professor at another South African university, one director of the Academy for Multilingualism at the target university, and one American fellow assisting with teaching and research at the target university conducted the workshops and collected data. All have experience teaching writing in the university setting. None had worked with the student participants prior to conducting the study. The associate professor and the American fellow were the workshop presenters at both campuses.

The Participants

The 37 participants self-selected by registering for the workshops. All were enrolled in either honours, master's, or doctoral programmes at the target university. All 12 South African languages were represented among the participants, as home or learned languages, as well as a number of international languages. Participants were primarily South African but also included students from Zimbabwe and Cameroon. Of the 37 students registered, 18 completed the post-workshop questionnaire. This discrepancy was due to students having to leave early to attend classes or other engagements, or students not returning the questionnaires.

The 18 participants who returned the questionnaires were from the following faculties: Education (7), Humanities (8), Science and Agriculture (2), Health Sciences (1), and were registered for the following programmes: undergraduate (1), honours (6), master's (5), doctoral (5), postdoctoral (1). Consent to use participant responses for research purposes was obtained from participants. All responses were voluntarily provided by participants. Participants' personal information was not collected and the questionnaires remained anonymised.

Workshop and Questionnaire

Workshops took place over the course of one 4-hour session on each campus. During the workshop, the two presenters split their time. Discussions, activities, and PowerPoint slides were components of each presentation. The same workshop, facilitated by the same presenters, was given on both university campuses. After the workshop, students were asked to complete a questionnaire. The responses to this questionnaire represent the data collected. Research approval and ethical clearance for the questionnaires were provided through the target university.

Data Analysis

As part of preparing for the workshop, a questionnaire with a single question was circulated to participants who showed interest in the workshop. The question sought to get participants' reasons for wanting to attend the workshop. Their response to the workshop was based on the advertisement, which provided the title of the workshop, facilitators, and the target audience. The participants' pre-workshop responses are captured in Table 1.

Table 1

Pre-Workshop Questionnaire Responses

Reasons for attending the workshop

- Self development
- Improve writing
- Enhance research skills
- Improve academic performance
- Writing dissertation
- Writing research proposal
- Compulsory for bursary
- Writing best thesis

- Learn
- Expressing in English
- Multilingual practices
- Research skills
- Multilingual research
- Enhance academic writing
- Understand writing workshops
- Learn about multilingualism

A qualitative analysis was undertaken by researchers to examine post-workshop questionnaire data. Due to the small sample size, researchers were able to read through questionnaires and identify commonalities in the feedback. At the urban campus, 20 participants registered and nine questionnaires were completed. At the rural campus, 17 students registered and nine questionnaires were completed. Thus, the sample size analysed consisted of 18 questionnaires. The questionnaire consisted of two questions: What did you like the most about the workshop? How can we improve the workshop? Table 2 captures the responses of the participants.

Table 2

Post-Workshop Questionnaire Responses

What did you like most about the workshop?	How can we improve the workshop?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How multilingualism work in writing and communication</i> • <i>Diversity of languages</i> • <i>Improvement of language skills</i> • <i>Enhanced cognitive abilities</i> • <i>Increased confidence in multilingualism</i> • <i>Multilingualism and translanguaging in academic career</i> • <i>Language repertoires and translanguaging</i> • <i>Practicability and hands on approach</i> • <i>Interactions and sharing opinions</i> • <i>Importance of multilingualism and translanguaging</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include all spoken languages in the vicinity • More engaging exercises • Regularise workshops • Provide more time • Market it more • Include sign language • Time management

Discussion of findings

The reasons for attending the workshop reveal the students' various motivations and situatedness. Some envisaged the engagement as instrumental in helping them navigate thesis, dissertation, and even proposal writing. Among the skills required to complete a research proposal, dissertation, or thesis are clear writing and effective editing (Hofstee, 2006). For university students, it is important to make multilingualism work for them in crafting the important documents in their postgraduate journeys. This comes from the reality that only one language presides over academic writing whilst other languages, in which students might be more proficient, are excluded. This is often termed as the de facto status of English (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). There is also an implied acknowledgement by students that they do not feel they have attained the level of language proficiency necessary for academic engagements, hence a desire to improve their academic writing and English expression. The level of English

proficiency, which manifests in writing deficiencies, is often reported as a barrier to student attainment in education (Ntombela & Ngubane, 2022). The students also expected to use multilingualism for personal development, and to increase their knowledge of multilingualism and multilingual practices.

Linked to the instrumental utility of the workshops is students' expectation to hone their research skills and to learn more about multilingualism. This obviously speaks to university education in general, where certain subjects that resonate with one's location become the focus of intellectual pursuit. This is especially true for topics that have an emancipatory promise such as multilingualism (Heugh & Stroud, 2020). Interestingly, the complex nature of university education is such that some activities are positioned for compliance purposes—such as the student whose motivation to attend the workshop was to fulfil the bursary requirement. Whilst one might not expect any benefit for such a participant, workshops have a way of changing mindsets.

Notably, whilst some students' expectations (such as wanting to learn more about multilingualism practices) resonate with the objectives of the workshop, others (such as wanting to improve academic writing) reveal the principal concerns of postgraduate students, and areas where they need support. Multilingualism is considered a catalyst in providing a space for students to get assistance (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2024). That is, because the target participants were multilingual postgraduate students whose concern was writing in a multilingual context, the workshop was seen as capable of addressing any writing shortcomings.

There is undoubtedly a positive uptake of multilingualism and related concepts of translanguaging and language repertoires. This reflects the inherently multilingual nature of the majority of South African students, who, notably, have not been given the opportunity to tap into the advantages of being multilingual (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2024; Ntombela et al., 2024). The default approach in academic writing has been monolingual, effectively suspending the incorporation of multilingual realities in text construction. The workshops were therefore intended to challenge and unsettle the mistaken practice of dismissing students' multilingualism.

Furthermore, as participants appeared fascinated, it is apparent that they no longer view linguistic multiplicity and diversity as a problem. Nevertheless, academia seems prone to promoting monolingualism and a singularity of expression through its emphasis on the English cultural tradition in composition (Weekly et al., 2022). In this arrangement, other languages are often seen as interfering with the Anglo-Saxon pattern of thought. However, the workshops underscored the practicality of allowing various thought processes in the different languages participants possess. This was obviously a departure from what participants had experienced for most of their academic careers.

The findings also suggest a relationship between multilingualism and cognition, as evidenced by enhanced language skills. Research abounds that testifies to the positive transference of first-language acquisition to second-language acquisition (Ambele, 2022; Ambele & Todd, 2021; Ralushai et al., 2025). In other words, a good grounding in the first language sets a better foundation for the learning of the second language. It therefore goes without saying that when languages that a student possesses are allowed to contribute to their writing process, their level of cognition is bound to get better.

Participants revealed an increased confidence in multilingualism, which contrasts with the prevalent vote of no confidence. Lack of confidence in multilingualism arises from its lack of contribution to the production of academic texts. Students are rightly expected to see no benefit in languages that do not contribute to their academic engagement and success. Therefore, their level of confidence is equally expected to increase when they discover that they can utilise their multilingualism in text construction.

Participants' confidence in multilingualism was further enhanced through the practical application of multilingual theoretical aspects. The workshops provided practical exercises to show participants how to apply multilingual strategies. These exercises demonstrated the inclusion of various languages in

generating ideas for their writing, which allowed them to tap into various expressions adapted from the diverse languages in their possession.

In addition, participants felt free to interact and voice their opinions. In a situation that acknowledges diverse linguistic presence, participants are no longer restricted to communicating in one language (in which they may have varying levels of proficiency) but are encouraged to express themselves across languages in which they feel comfortable. In this way, meaning is negotiated, resulting in an enriched text. Furthermore, negotiation process fosters deeper learning for all involved.

However, not all languages were catered for. For instance, Sign Language, which is the 12th official language, was not represented or included in the workshops. This was despite the fact that multilingualism emphasises inclusion, which means that some languages should not be seen as prioritised at the expense of others. This was an important observation by participants because historically, some languages were left behind because they were not deemed essential in serious academic transactions. The Deaf community continues to suffer neglect because Sign Language is often treated as an add-on, and not as a pivotal part of their existence (Matshanisi & Ntombela, 2024). There is a critical need therefore to make sure that such workshops actively incorporate Sign Language and other languages in the vicinity of participants. This can be established during the time of preparation by asking potential participants to indicate their language repertoires.

Whilst the praise for the practicability of the workshop was evident, there seemed to be fewer engaging exercises. A desire for more practical, engaging exercises underscores the importance of ample opportunities for students to practice and actively participate. This is important because part of not embracing multilingualism is based on not knowing how to break from monolingual practice. In fact, as Heugh and Stroud (2020) contended, the South African Constitution and the Language-in-Education policy support multilingualism, except that implementation has not been followed through. Thus, engaging exercises in the context of these workshops assists in escaping the same trap of reducing multilingualism to a theoretical construct without practical application.

Nonetheless, there is always a challenge of limited time, especially for practical sessions—not only time for practising the concepts but also the management of time. Time management includes starting on time and finishing on time, which is often a challenge. The perception of limited time is sometimes caused by interest and engagement. Interesting activities seem to finish when one still desires for more. Unfortunately, there is not enough time to cater for all individual needs in one workshop session.

The desire for more time can also be interpreted as the desire for more workshops. Yet, such a workshop conducted once a semester gives the impression that it is merely one of those boxes that must be ticked. And, a once-a-semester workshop may not be enough to transform practice. If the outcome is to transform practice, then it is fair enough to regularise the workshops. This is even more urgent for students who, for the greater part of their academic careers, have been exposed to a monolingual approach.

Additionally, participants expressed the need for the workshop to be marketed. In fact, the number of potential students who could attend the workshop does not tally with the actual number who attended. This leads participants to think that the workshop was not adequately marketed. Nonetheless, the nature of a workshop generally prescribes the number of participants, especially when there are practical sessions and a limited number of facilitators. A writing workshop also means that a timeous follow-up needs to be extended by the facilitator to all participants, which is not possible with many attendees.

Conclusion

There are various reasons for students to want to attend multilingual workshops, chief of which stems from their need to navigate the production of pivotal documents such as research proposals, dissertations, and theses. For multilingual students writing at a postgraduate level, it is important to get assistance from multilingualism as the main asset in their possession. Students also displayed a desire to learn more about multilingualism, which suggests that they see a link between multilingualism and postgraduate writing. They may not be alone in seeing such a link because some bursaries seem to have prescribed such a workshop in their requirements.

Multilingualism has also been linked to cognition, as implied by the reported improvement of language skills. Indeed, given that the first language has been reported to positively facilitate the acquisition of subsequent languages, it goes without saying that multiple languages should assist students to acquire multiple perspectives and thus enrich their educational experience. Nevertheless, multilingualism in the workshops seems to have excluded Sign Language. There is an urgent need to acknowledge and repair the past injustices towards the Deaf community. When everybody embraces Sign Language, it will go a long way into the inclusion of the Deaf community in every sphere of life, especially in mainstream education.

Furthermore, there is a need to increase the frequency of these kinds of workshops. Having them just once per semester gives the impression that it is a box that must be ticked. If multilingual students are to benefit from their multilingual realities, then frequent training to tap into their multilingual nature will be required such that it forms part and parcel of their academic life.

Limitations

The small sample size, made smaller by participants who did not complete the questionnaire, led to a limited pool to draw upon for study findings. The general nature of the workshop questionnaire also meant that participant responses were sometimes vague or overly general. These limitations can be addressed in future iterations of this study by enlarging and refining the questions on the post-workshop survey, and conducting additional workshops to enlarge the data pool.

This study was crafted as a preliminary inquiry into multilingual graduate students' writing experiences at a South African university. Thus, researchers recognise the time limitations that impacted the ability to host multiple workshops and collect more data by way of attendee responses. Nevertheless, our preliminary findings provide valuable insight into students' desire to learn more about how to address multilingualism in the graduate student writing experience, and future scholarship can expand on our initial findings.

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Equity and Epistemic Justice of English-Medium Instruction in the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Realism Perspective

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Abstract

Higher institutions of learning are dominated by the English language. This paper interrogates equity and epistemic justice posed by the dominance of English-medium instruction in educational institutions. It argues that the processes of internationalisation and globalisation work in complicity with neocolonialism, perpetuating the subjugation of local languages and barring access to knowledge for the majority. The underpinning arguments are based on the realities of six Middle Eastern institutions of higher learning and six in Africa. The study is contextualised in the educational policy transformation imperatives that adopt English-medium instruction. The paper has adopted critical realism in order to highlight the epistemic injustice and linguistic inequality resulting from the hegemony of the English language. Uncritical adoption of the English language perpetuates injustices suffered by the users of other languages. The paper highlights epistemic access challenges in the context of knowledge economies. The main argument is that English-medium instruction is responsible for the troubles of epistemic access because it serves the aspirations of the minority elite at the expense of the majority.

Keywords: English-medium instruction, globalisation, internationalisation, critical realism, epistemic access

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Introduction

There are no people or society on earth without language. In fact, language is the distinguishing feature of *Homo sapiens* from every other creature (Aitchison, 2008). Thus, every society has a particular worldview based on its inherent language. Not only do people interact with the world and make sense of everything around them through language but, through language, they interact with each other and are able to accomplish all sorts of things that are unique to *Homo sapiens*. This language facility has caused linguists such as Chomsky to theorise that fundamentally, human beings must have had a common language on which all the languages of the world are based; that is, a universal grammar (Aitchison, 2008; Crystal, 2012; Schmid, 2012). This idea is in fact, reminiscent of the biblical concept of Babel (Ntombela, 2022). Theoretically, therefore, this places every human being on an equal linguistic footing. However, as Spolsky (1998) argued, the local language landscape has been altered by the spread of languages through political and military conquest. The cases of such spread include Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, Mayan, Manding, and Latin in ancient world, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa, Central America, West Africa, and Western Europe, respectively (Spolsky, 1998).

The dominance of English on a global scale has caught the attention of sociolinguists such as Spolsky (1998, p. 77) who asserted: “This growing linguistic hegemony of English is dangerous and harmful . . . by threatening to take over important functions from other major languages.” In this article, the sociolinguistic problems of English-medium of instruction in the Middle East and North Africa are interrogated through the lens of critical realism. Critical realism is appropriate in the article’s drive to interrogate the tenets of globalisation and internationalisation. These two concepts are argued to be working along the same aspirations of neocolonialism and neoliberalism.

A Critical Realism Approach

Critical realism as conceived by Bhaskar has three domains: “the real consisting of mechanisms; the actual, consisting of events; and the empirical, consisting of experiences” (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 46). According to Molinari (2022), to account for the social reality of a phenomenon, critical realism appeals to both relativism and foundationalism where the former represents subjectivity and the latter, objectivity. Experiences are obviously located in the past and therefore include histories, whilst everyday life constitutes the actual—what we know (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The real is the conflation of the actual and empirical events through the mechanisms that underlie the manifest actual and empirical (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

In the context of this article, it means that the experiences of those who are affected by the hegemony of the English language are driven by established mechanisms in the form of ideological systems. These ideologies manifest themselves in the policies and constraints that drive behaviour in a predictable complex direction. In other words, the beliefs about the supremacy of the English language and the currency of the Western culture drive the adoption and enforcement of English-oriented education. It also means that teachers of English, for instance, who often consider English language teaching an instrumental exercise that is apolitical and only serves to promote educational ends, must reflect on the impact that the English language has on the learners who must often abandon their own languages (and culture) in order to immerse themselves in that target language. Furthermore, there must be an open dialogue between those in the centre and those in the periphery because in most cases, those at the centre, considered to be the owners of the English language, only see learners in the periphery in terms of revenue they bring as they enrol for various English language courses. These are the underlying mechanisms that remain intact and drive practice, notwithstanding that such mechanisms have serious implications for epistemic access.

Epistemic Access

“Epistemology refers to how educational researchers can know the reality that they wish to describe. This needs to be distinguished from ontology, which refers to the nature of this reality” (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 85). Keeping the two terms apart is essential as Molinari (2022) rightly argued. For example, that there is education, economy, politics, neocolonialism, and so forth, is ontological according to Molinari (2022), but the manner in which we access, study, and seek to understand education, economy, politics, neocolonialism, etcetera is epistemological.

To illustrate further, Saussure (as cited in Holdcroft, 1991; Ntombela, 2008) made a distinction between *langage* (natural language) and *langue* (a particular language). This means *langage* corresponds to ontology in that it represents the reality of the existence of language as a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, *langue* corresponds to epistemology in that it is the means by which an individual is able to access *langage*. Put differently, our knowledge and proof of the existence of *langage* is based on the attainment of a particular language (*langue*). *Langue*, therefore, consists of all natural languages, living or dead, such as English, French, Portuguese, and forth. These natural languages should not be conflated with *langage* as a general phenomenon. When such conflation occurs, the result is that *langue*, which is a particular language such as English, is taken to represent *langage* to the extent that the natural language phenomenon is taken to mean just one particular language.

In other words, ontology represents the world in its objective sense whether understood or not, but epistemology represents the subjective entry into the ontological world in order to make sense of what it entails. Thus, various epistemological tools are available in order to gain entry into the world of knowledge. The crucial epistemological tool is language. This means that access to knowledge is facilitated by language. It can therefore be said that language facilitates epistemic access; that is, language is an epistemological tool but not knowledge itself, which is ontological.

Conflating ontology with epistemology has undesirable outcomes. For example, if language, which is epistemological when used to access knowledge, is regarded as ontological, then language becomes knowledge. In fact, the wrapping up of knowledge with the English language has resulted in such a conflation to the extent that the English language is equated to knowledge whilst other languages are not. This explains why any education accessed through any other epistemological tool (language) other than the English language is regarded inferior. To know has come to mean speaking English fluently, for no one is believed to possess knowledge if it is not expressed through the English language.

The result of this conflation, furthermore, is that instead of facilitating access to knowledge, the English language has become a barrier for many who have not developed proficiency in it, and are denied access to the same knowledge through their language(s). Adopting a critical realism approach is therefore essential in unmasking epistemic access as implied in the dire situation of English-medium instruction (EMI) in Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

EMI in MENA

The Middle East in the context of this article will be limited to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which consists of six countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It need not be emphasised that these countries are bound together by the common Arabic language. There are interesting commonalities among GCC countries in how they have responded to various challenges around education, economy, and politics. Barnawi (2018) in his assessment observed that these countries have sought to diversify their economies and gradually shift from oil-based economy to knowledge-based economy. A knowledge-based economy for the GCC entails internationalisation of education. The common factor in the internationalisation of education is the adoption of EMI and the marginalisation of Arabic as an academic medium of instruction.

The encroachment of Western ideology in the GCC has arguably been facilitated by the adoption of EMI. Whilst the adoption of EMI was presented as the only alternative to safeguard future economic growth through educational transformation, the consequences were contradictory, especially on the part of other educational stakeholders such as parents and students. Instead of being incorporated into the economy, many citizens found themselves excluded as a new class with access to the English language had been created. Unfortunately, the Western ideology came packaged with “neoliberal capitalist ideologies that constantly call for individuality, self-interest, free markets, endless competition and privatisation” at the expense of “Islamic values that promote collectivity, solidarity, and socially coherent elements that form the basis of GCC structures” (Barnawi, 2018, p. 172). Paradoxically, these economic and educational reforms were brought to the GCC by giant organisations such as World Trade Organisation, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund located in the West (Barnawi, 2018).

As expected, the adoption of EMI brought cultural shift in many aspects of life in the GCC. The youth of Saudi Arabia, for instance, are reported to have tried all means to assimilate American culture including dress code and mannerisms so that they could expedite acquisition of English (Barnawi, 2018). Young Emirati children are increasingly becoming monolingual in the English language (Hopkyns, 2014). All this means that in the foreseeable future, the next generation will have crossed over into the Western cultural orientation. This, therefore, explains resistance mounted by political and religious enthusiasts locally.

Such criticism by local scholars and Muslims is more pronounced in Qatar where the replacement of Arabic by English is seen as a symbol of outside interference aimed at undermining Arabic culture and Muslim identity (Abdel-Moneim, 2016). This criticism is warranted given the fact that the adoption of EMI in Qatar has not helped students perform better or closed the widening gap between education and the job market (Ntombela, 2022). What seems to have been achieved, as reported by Barnawi (2018), is the creation of another class of elites who, because of access to the English language, are sent to prestigious Ivy League institutions and come back to occupy top jobs.

Holi et al. (2022, p. 51) contended that Omanis have no misgivings about English having become an intrinsic part of Omani life partly because “English has never been a colonial imposition on them.” However, most countries that retained English, and continue to call for more English, were colonised and had English imposed upon them. Nevertheless, Holi et al. (2022, p. 51) were on point in observing that English in Oman is prominent because of the dominance of the “non-Omani and non-Arabic-speaking labour force.” This ties the adoption of EMI to the job market. Paradoxically, another reason for the adoption of EMI in Oman was to facilitate Omanisation, “the government’s ambitious plan to gradually replace the expatriate labour force with Omani nationals” (Holi et al., 2022, p. 51). Omani nationals already have Arabic that can be used to achieve Omanisation, but it might seem that the job market has been sold to the English such that to access it, one needs to have competence in the English language.

After the oil boom in Kuwait, Mahfouz (2022) reported that literacy levels climbed because of heavy investment into education. However, it soon became apparent that literacy had to shift from Arabic to the English language because Kuwait, like other Gulf countries, adopted “the American model of higher education where English-medium instruction is the norm” (Mahfouz, 2022, p. 69). There are signs that point to the decline of Arabic due to heavy investment directed to the English language. For instance, one of Mahfouz’s (2022, p. 80) participants admitted that “although holding on to Arabic seems to be harder nowadays, I think the more we work on loving it, the more we can go back to it.” This clearly shows that Arabic is gradually slipping from the grasp of many Kuwaiti youth. If such a trend continues unabated, the next generation Kuwaitis will be non-English monolingual speakers of the English language—a sociolinguistic concern.

Bahrain has not only adopted EMI but has also imported the whole Western pedagogy and practice (Ntombela, 2022). The reason for such a move is reminiscent of what is happening across the GCC where the marathon to internationalise means the adoption of EMI in the education sector. This is usually sold as solution for the disparity between the education system and the job market. However, instead of facilitating access to the job market (and epistemic access), a lot of youth is left in the lurch because the Arabic they should be using to enter the world of work and to access knowledge has been delinked and reduced to a religious object.

Like the GCC, countries in North Africa, that is, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan are commonly bound by the Arabic language. However, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria also share a common heritage of being colonised by France. This means that for the three countries, French has an official status as the language of learning and teaching, especially in higher education. This is a common trend for most former colonies. For those three countries, nonetheless, EMI is largely aspirational because there seems to be dwindling support for French largely due to its colonial association and the association of English with global communication and the international job market (Troudi, 2022).

On the contrary, Libya's colonisation by Italy was short-lived and it did not seem to have had an impact in shifting the status of Arabic as the language of all academic transactions. Although the Arabic language reigns supreme in all academic transactions in Libya, there are views that would favour an Arabic-English bilingual programme. Such views, as reported by Troudi (2022), are excavated from participants who use EMI and from those who use Arabic-medium instruction (AMI) in two science and engineering departments. This arrangement is meant to give students access to the global job market through EMI whilst giving them access to knowledge through AMI.

In Algeria, the issue of language is sensitively divided between the proponents of Francophone and advocates of Arabic (Troudi, 2022, p. 137), where the latter is advocated "as a symbol of social, linguistic and religious identity." However, there is also a general decline of French in society and education as a result of English being "seen as a solution to the educational, technological and economic problems of the country" (Troudi, 2022, p. 137). How English came to be viewed this way is probably based on the marketisation of the English world and the English language. This marketisation is in sync with a neoliberal ethos of capitalism, which only achieves the accumulation of revenue from those who buy the English language product without any significant alleviation of the economic, educational, and technological plight experienced by non-English countries, especially in the South (Gayton, 2020; Holi et al., 2022).

Tunisia is also marked by a competitive interplay of Arabic language and French. French dominates in higher education because of the colonial legacy that benefited the elites who continued to strengthen the ties with the French government and Francophone policies after independence (Troudi, 2022). Arabic is also deeply rooted as a national and official language but its academic utility is limited to primary and secondary education, however, there is growing talk among Tunisian academics who argue for educational policy shift in favour of English as a medium of instruction in order to catch up with economic development, modernisation, and global positioning (Troudi, 2022). There is no doubt that the influence of English on a global scale is affecting academics who tend to conflate linguistic matters with issues of the economy and modernisation.

There is obviously a keen interest by some academics in North Africa to establish EMI as demonstrated in Morocco by Belhiah (2022, p. 165) who recommended that EMI be established by developing policy that must be "undertaken by a committee composed of local linguists and language policy experts who have an intimate and acute understanding of the sociolinguistic situation in the country." Moreover, Belhiah (2022, p. 165) seemed to subscribe to the notion that education is apolitical when he advised that the "committee should steer clear of ideological and political motivations by focusing primordially on how EMI can be integrated into the Moroccan education system." From a critical

standpoint, knowledge is never value-free but is ideological, which means that “the institutionalised forms of knowledge embody assumptions and perspectives of the dominant social groups, which introduce other communities to the same value system in order to legitimise the dominance of the elite group” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 16). Similarly, learning is never simply instrumental but is political, which means schooling is not only “implicated in the exercise of power and domination in society,” but teachers are expected to ethically negotiate “the hidden values and interests behind knowledge, and are expected to help students to adopt a critical orientation to learning” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 17). In other words, any movement towards the adoption of EMI in Morocco is a political move and those responsible for advocating such a move have a moral responsibility to expose all the possible ramifications.

On the other hand, Egypt is a former British colony and therefore has a visible presence of EMI. Higher education in Egypt is dominated by EMI and, as Troudi (2022) reported, preparation for transition to EMI at tertiary level is done at primary and secondary school levels. Egypt sees English as a conduit to economic development. However, it is noted that EMI represents inequality given that most low-income parents are unable to afford private tuition for their children. The result is that the society is further divided into those who have access to English and can proceed to higher education against those who do not have such access and can never make it to higher education.

Similarly, in Sudan there is a keenness to have EMI strongly established. Like Egypt, Sudan was a British colony, which explains the presence of EMI. Even though English was used as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions in Sudan, the 1990s policies of Arabisation replaced English with Arabic (Alhassan, 2022). This move has not been without contestation given that those who argue for AMI assert that Arabic in higher education “would ensure easy learning and understanding since it is the students’ first language” whilst those in favour of EMI contend that “Arabic and not English would undermine the employability and mobility of Sudanese graduates in both national and international labour markets (Alhassan, 2022, pp. 169–170). Alhassan has gone to the extent of recommending the adoption of English-only policy by Sudanese higher education institutions. Paradoxically, that author went on to recommend the use of mother tongue. This sounds contradictory because you cannot have an English-only policy and still allow other languages to be utilised. Such a recommendation is based on the monolingual fallacy that English is better taught and learnt at the exclusion of a mother tongue (Canagarajah, 1999). Alhassan was probably aware that research has confirmed the need for children to be schooled in their mother tongue (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2016; Ntombela, 2020).

Eastern and Southern African Experience

The linguistic landscape in Eastern and Southern Africa is rich and dynamic. It consists of major languages spoken as a mother tongue by millions of Africans. These African languages include Amharic, Chichewa, isiZulu, Kikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, kiSwahili, Luyanda, Malagasy, Oromo, and Somali (Trudell, 2016). However, “the international languages have gained a strong foothold in the national institutions of Eastern and Southern Africa” (Trudell, 2016, p. vii). Moreover, “the more recent influence of globalisation has heightened the role and prestige of international languages (particularly English) in education,” which are seen as the gateway to global citizenship, economic progress, and enhanced social standing (Trudell, 2016, p. vii).

In Angola, for instance, Portuguese is the official language and is the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, “English is gradually usurping the privileged position of Portuguese due to the role English has in achieving economic opportunity that has emerged in Angola” (Trudell, 2016, p. 26). This is despite the fact that neither Portuguese nor English is the mother tongue for the majority of learners. The consequence is that for the majority of learners, the rate of learning is slowed down and the quality of teaching is affected (Diarra, 2003).

In Tanzania, kiSwahili is spoken by 95 per cent of the population, and in the island of Zanzibar, it is spoken by the whole population; yet, the education policy promotes the use of English as the language of instruction in mathematics and ICT (Brock-Utne, 2017). This has not helped in improving the quality of education or the learning experience. In fact, the promotion of English as the language of instruction in mathematics and ICT makes these learning fields available to only those who have access to English education, thus labelling the majority learners, and by extension the general Tanzanian population, as incapable of mastering mathematics and ICT.

In Malawi, only 0.18 per cent use English for household communication and over 70 per cent use Chichewa as a language of household communication; yet, English is being used as a medium instruction throughout schooling as per the new policy (Brock-Utne, 2017). This elevation of English is neocolonial because Malawi was colonised by Britain. Those who benefited from the establishments of the colonial system could not think past the system but were caught up in its intricacies, and perpetuated the cycle of dependence on the colonial master. Unfortunately, the neglect of learners' languages of household communication in education means that they do not have access to knowledge offered in English.

In Rwanda, Kinyarwanda is spoken by 99.4 per cent of the population, and could have been used as a medium of instruction; instead French was opted for, which is now being replaced by English (Brock-Utne, 2017). This was unfortunately implemented despite counter-recommendations by Global Education Monitoring Report and the African Union. This demonstrates an obsession with dependence on Western powers for education and economy. Participation in the international economy and global markets is often cited as the reason for adopting English-medium instruction; instead of assisting the majority to realise their educational dream, only the minority elite that has access to the language chosen for education benefits.

It is puzzling why African states run away from using their own languages for educational purposes. Luke (2005, p. xvii) suggested that even though the colonial master may have departed, the master still holds "a significant place in the political and educational imaginary." Most European countries use their own language as medium of instruction both at school level and at university level. It is a misconception that English is learnt best when it is a medium of instruction (Brock-Utne, 2017). This misconception is promoted by donors, former colonial powers, the publishing industry in the West, and the African elite (Brock-Utne, 2017). It is also too common for African states to cite globalisation and internationalisation imperatives as forces behind opting for a European language as a medium of instruction.

Globalisation

The advent of globalisation was brought about by the collapse of rigid boundaries in market trade. This means that nations opened themselves up for global trade. However, it immediately becomes noticeable that the global movement is unequally distributed. The influx is usually from poorer nations to rich ones where the poor are in search of greener pastures whilst the hosts are in search of cheap labour (de Wit et al., 2017). The most sought after cheap labour would be the one that will not pose any communication challenges. In other words, the most preferred labourer is the one who speaks the language of the host. The result is that the labourers are forced to learn the language of the host in order to reap the benefits, or so that their labour will be bought. It so happens that in this global movement, the destinations are predominantly the English-speaking countries (de Wit et al., 2017). The cycle seems to have come full circle where at first, the movement was from the English-speaking country to establish a colony in order to acquire cheap labour that would support the economy of the coloniser (Pakenham, 2014)—now, movement is from the former colony to the former coloniser.

From an educational perspective, this means that initially, the coloniser came to educate locals so that they could become civil servants and contribute to the economy of the coloniser (Brock-Utne, 2017; Trudell, 2016). This process was accompanied by the dismantling of the established education systems,

and establishment of those of the coloniser—thus creating dependency on the coloniser. For instance in Madagascar, the medium of instruction prior to French colonisation in 1897 was Malagasy, after which all schools that did not use French as a medium of instruction were shut down (Trudell, 2016). The result was that over time, the locals were made to forget their own educational heritage and remained with the education system of the coloniser as point of reference. This new education system was tied to the economy and the coloniser presided over the means of production. It therefore became impossible to dissociate the education system from the economy. The education system of the coloniser was packaged with the language of the coloniser, which became the only means of accessing the economy. Even when the coloniser seemed to have left, access to the economy still relied on the language of the coloniser; in that way, the coloniser retained the economic power in a neocolonial system (Luke, 2005). This therefore explains why in the globalisation agenda, the language that gives access to the economy of the former coloniser, becomes an economic capital. Interestingly, the globe seems to converge on an English-speaking world, which is regarded as the economic hub of the world (Hyatt, 2013).

In globalisation, people migrate to the host country from different language backgrounds. In order to facilitate communication among themselves, the language that gives access to the economy becomes their lingua franca (Ntombela, 2022). What is observable about the lingua franca is that it takes the contextual shape of its interlocutors. In the case of English, there is accommodation for a plethora of expressions as shaped by the background of each interlocutor. This has given rise to a pluralisation of the English language into World Englishes (Harmer, 2006).

In the context of higher education, students migrate from different countries to an English-speaking institution and bring with them the influence of their languages into English expressions. This is accommodated in the system of globalisation because what is important is achieving communication. The theory of communicative competence finds a fertile ground in globalisation (Cele-Sangweni, 2021; Hymes, 1972; Ntombela, 2008). Communicative competence implies a degree of competence where it is normal that even one word could achieve a communicative end. For instance, by simply uttering “toilet,” a person could be pointed to the right direction where toilets are located, or by simply uttering, “stop” whilst riding in a crowded bus, the passenger would have achieved the desired goal of getting off the bus at the correct station. This means, interlocutors are able to negotiate communication goals through their various linguistic expressions of the English language and, over time, these expressions become part of the linguistic repertoire in the lingua franca. For instance, in an interview that Sartor (2014) conducted with one student participant, a Buriat girl from Ulan Ude in Mongolia, the student, when asked about the circumstances for communicating in English, reported to have friends from Africa, outer Mongolia, India, and the United Kingdom with whom she communicates in English; even though she admits that her English is not good, they speak English and understand each other. In a nutshell, English lingua franca mirrors a globalisation agenda.

Internationalisation

Internationalisation might seem to suggest liquid borders where everyone becomes an international citizen. Again, the international seems to be limited to an English-speaking world to the extent that the desire to tap to the world economy simply means having access to amenities offered through the English language (de Wit et al., 2017). In the context of higher education, or education in general, internationalisation simply means offering programmes in the English language (Ntombela, 2017). The paradox should be obvious, but because of the subtleties of neocolonial and neoliberal systems, a new doctrine is crafted, which sells an ideology that unless the English language embodies every aspect of knowledge, that knowledge remains in the fringes and cannot be of world standard. Therefore, through internationalisation, education is organised through the English language, which is sold as a panacea for all educational (and economic) woes. Unlike English lingua franca, which is tolerated in the globalisation

agenda, the standardised form of English is promoted in the internationalisation arrangement (Ntombela, 2022). This is the type of English that is dubbed academic English and is expected in all academic transactions, including academic publications and the general publication industry (Molinari, 2022).

Through internationalisation, non-English-speaking countries adopt English-medium instruction in their educational programmes from school level to tertiary level, arguing that if they do not do so, they will be left out of the international world (Trudell, 2016). This is sometimes because the economy of those countries is either presided over by the English language or the English language has an interest in their economy. In cases where the economy is presided over by the English language, parents want to safeguard the future of their children by making sure that they have access to the English language, which holds the key to the world of work. In the case where the English language has an interest in the economy, the English-speaking “international” bodies sell themselves as expert economic advisers. Their advice is usually along the lines of diversifying the economy by making sure that the education system adopts the English language in order to attract the international labour—meaning the English labour.

The result is that in internationalisation, the competition becomes too stiff for many who must acquire the nuances of a standardised form of English. Needless to say, that competition in its various forms is a fundamental ethos of a neoliberal system (Barnawi, 2018). That is why a plethora of programmes is marketed, promising to hone academic English skills, which translates into lucrative revenue for the English language industry. This revenue is put to good use because it goes into developing the English language. As a result, the English language is forever in demand because it poses itself to be presiding over all forms of knowledge.

Discussion

The object of this article is clearly laid out as that of interrogating the dominance of EMI in MENA. In order to achieve such a project, a critical realism approach needed to be adopted. A critical realism approach is essential in underscoring the underlying mechanisms that shape the adoption, imposition of, and reliance on English language, which has become a sociolinguistic nightmare.

The main sociolinguistic problem of the expansion of EMI, especially in MENA, is that there are established languages that serve better the educational objectives of the majority of students. Perhaps the adoption of EMI could have been morally justified if the languages in these countries were incapable of handling academic content. Such a situation exists in Comoros where even though Comorian is spoken by 95 per cent of the population, and is classified as the official language alongside French and Arabic, it is only used as a medium of instruction at pre-school level because of the lack of development of a stable written form of the language (Trudell, 2016). In Comoros, therefore, French is used as the medium of instruction. But even in that situation, there is no absolute moral justification for not developing a stable orthography for the language spoken by 95 per cent of the population, which would serve them much better educationally.

The MENA situation is both sociolinguistically puzzling and disappointing. All these vast territories are bound together by the Arabic language, which has all the sophisticated amenities to handle any academic content and has done so over centuries. It remains to be answered why it is so easy for MENA to yield to the English world’s soft power (or remain bound to the colonial language such as French). Whilst the justification for the adoption of EMI across the length and breadth of MENA is prefixed with a modernisation discourse and economic diversification imperatives, reality seems to point to the suffering of local youths who are burdened with deciphering the English language and accessing knowledge through the language they barely understand.

There is no doubt that all the benefits of EMI go to the English-speaking world. However, academics and scholars in general, who represent the minority, seem to gravitate towards the adoption of EMI. Most academics and scholars have benefited from education offered through a foreign language and mistake their individual experiences to be representative of the vast majority. In any given country, only a very small number of the population go beyond the borders of the country. Therefore, citing international travel and communication, and access to the global world, obfuscates the local needs. In fact, those

(especially from Europe and non-English-speaking countries) do not need to be taught in the medium of English in order to travel and communicate with the global world. They can simply learn the language of their destination, either as a subject in formal education or use any available self-teaching mechanism. That the whole population must abandon its language that is used for epistemological access and be taught in a foreign language in order to be part of a global village is fallacious and unjust.

Another sociolinguistic problem about the expansion of EMI is the threat it poses to other languages. The concern about the relegation of Arabic to the periphery is genuine, and should be taken seriously. Not only does EMI threaten to replace Arabic's important transactions, it threatens to confuse people's identities and sense of worth. When children grow up and can no longer speak Arabic, the sense of who they are will certainly be affected. Whilst they will never be wholly accepted in the English world because they are not English, they will equally have no place in the Arab world because they would have lost the essence of being Arab.

Most importantly, knowledge should be divorced from language at ontological level. In that respect, every language at epistemological level is capable of accessing knowledge. And every human being is endowed with language capability so that access to knowledge is open to everyone. When that capability is removed because the language with which knowledge could be accessed is denied, it tramples on the linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2008). The implication therefore in the Middle East, especially in GCC, where EMI is being radically adopted at visible linguistic suffering of many students, is that those students' linguistic human rights are being violated. The same could be said about nations in North Africa that are either relying on French as a medium of instruction or anticipating a shift to EMI. In fact, the adoption of EMI by some Eastern and Southern African nations indicates that things have not gone too well for ordinary citizens. The adoption of EMI in the experience of Eastern and Southern African nations, cited in this article, seems to benefit a few elites because access to better English tuition is linked to a financial capacity to which the majority falls short.

Conclusion

Without doubt, globalisation and internationalisation make significant contributions to the expansion of EMI in MENA and elsewhere. Both these phenomena are used to justify the adoption of EMI. Whilst there is nothing wrong with learning English as an additional language, there is certainly a lot wrong with replacing a viable language with English. In other words, it is possible to meet the imperatives of globalisation without having to adopt EMI.

There is evidence that local languages are affected by the adoption of EMI as part of internationalisation. The sociolinguistic problem of internationalisation is that it packages knowledge with the English language to the extent that it becomes difficult to dissociate knowledge from the English language. In fact, in many higher education contexts, academic literacy is being equated with English proficiency. Thus, students who are proficient in English are easily passed as being highly literate academically, which means that proficiency in any other language does not count as academic literacy in the internationalisation arrangement.

The big question that underlies the principal object of this article is whether there is anything that can or must be done. Certainly, if there is concern for the majority of ordinary citizens who are negatively affected by the adoption of EMI or being educated in a foreign language whilst there is an option for a local language, something needs to be done. The contention of this article is that there are better ways of strengthening English language teaching and learning without affecting access to knowledge. The adoption of EMI is not a better option because it delays students' access to knowledge. Furthermore, the adoption of EMI is a threat to the survival and development of local languages as intellectual languages, which brings linguistic imbalance. Investing in local languages for epistemic access would go a long way towards improving the acquisition of the English language.

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Student's Ontological Journey Towards Academic Success: Indigenous Languages as Empowering Tools for Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

In the South African higher education context, the marginalisation of Indigenous languages perpetuates epistemic inequities and undermines students' academic success. This conceptual paper explores the ontological journey of students, framing Indigenous languages as empowering tools for lifelong learning and academic achievement. Drawing on decolonial theories and multilingual pedagogies, the paper argues that Indigenous languages are not merely mediums of communication but vital resources for epistemic access, identity formation, and knowledge production. It critiques the dominance of colonial languages in curricula and institutional structures, highlighting how neoliberal ideologies further entrench linguistic hierarchies that disadvantage students from marginalised backgrounds. The paper proposes a decolonial framework that centres Indigenous languages as catalysts for transformative education, fostering inclusivity, equity, and social justice. By engaging with various studies, the study reimagines higher education as a space where multilingualism and translanguaging practices disrupt existing power dynamics and empower students to reclaim their linguistic and cultural heritage. Ultimately, this paper advocates for the integration of Indigenous languages into pedagogical practices and institutional policies, arguing that such an approach is essential for fostering lifelong learning, academic success, and a more equitable educational landscape in South Africa.

Keywords: academic success, empowering, equity, Indigenous languages, lifelong learning, transformation

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Introduction

Notwithstanding the democratic South Africa that has a constitution, which affirms that all its citizens are equal in the eyes of law, the Indigenous languages continue to be ostracised in the South African higher education learning spaces (Albertyn, 2019). Their ostracisation is perpetuated by the persisting hegemony of English as a medium of instruction. Further, the imposition of English as medium of instruction continues to inculcate the Western worldview in the education (Razmjoo Moghadam & Barani, 2025) of the native South African students. This kind of academic administration skews equitable access to knowledge and knowledge creation among the native students. In so doing, this system of education demotivates the effective participation of students in their learning, heralding the deterioration of success rate and the upswing of the attrition rate. Furthermore, this system comprises students' ontological academic rigor given that a student's being is shaped by factors like their identity, which is intrinsically linked to their Indigenous languages. Therefore, students' Indigenous languages inform us as to who the students in the learning environment are, inclusive of the nature of their worldviews. The interface between the students' epistemological and ontological journeys results in their holistic development (Paul & Quiggin, 2020). This paper views students' academic journey as a transformative process, aligning with Miller's (2011, p. 8) perspective on transformation:

Transformation means death and rebirth. A holistic approach to higher education is one that supports our students in their transformational journey from youth to adulthood, from dependency to independence, from a self-contained identity to one that assimilates societal roles and responsibilities.

Against the above backdrop, this conceptual paper's objective is to explore the students' ontological journeys towards academic attainment, framing the Indigenous languages as resources that help empower students for lifelong learning, academic rigour, and academic success. The paper draws from decolonial theories, Indigenous knowledge systems, and inclusive pedagogies (da Silva et al., 2024) to support the authors' argument that Indigenous languages are not merely mediums of communication but vital resources for epistemic access, identity formation, students' onto-epistemological development, and knowledge production (Kayumova & Dou, 2022). Furthermore, the paper critiques the supremacy of colonial languages, such as English, in curricular design and interpretation, contending the devastating effects of monolingual practices (Namakula et al., 2025) and colonial education system on native students' learning and their ways of being during their holistic development and transformational journey. Transformative educational practices thus, push the boundaries that perpetuate the marginalisation of the native students in their own milieus. As one of the resources for disrupting the monolingual practices in higher education (Namakula et al., 2025), the Indigenous languages promote equity and social justice for the native students. The authors' arguments, premised on scholarly works, demonstrate that linguistic multiplicity helps empower students to reclaim their linguistic and cultural heritages, with the aim of curbing linguistic loss (Galla, 2016). Ultimately, the paper concludes that the integration of Indigenous languages into pedagogical practices and institutional policies potentially valorises the Indigenous students' worldviews. Hence, the students can be empowered for equitable academic success and lifelong learning. To advance this argument, the paper's structure begins by delineating the link of coloniality and language hegemony in the South African higher education context and outlining its decolonial theoretical underpinnings. It then examines language as an indispensable part of identity and the ontological journey, arguing for the recreation of knowledge and Indigenous wisdom through Indigenous languages. Subsequently, it positions these languages as catalysts for transformative education, before concluding with a discussion on the study's implications for pedagogical practice and institutional policy.

Delineation of Coloniality and Language in the South African Higher Education Context

The dominance of colonial languages in the South African education system continues to perpetuate both epistemic injustice and violations of Indigenous sovereignty (Maddox & Morton Ninomiya, 2025), disregarding students' academic success and their ontological journeys and identities. This stems from South Africa's history of the apartheid regime where education was purposefully segregated according to racial lines. The apartheid system of social engineering ensured that the majority of non-Whites were denied access to White academic institutions and quality education (Nyagope, 2023). Moreover, the linguistic architecture and epistemic hierarchy was institutionalised under apartheid through the Bantu Education Act (Government of the Union of South Africa, 1953), which was a set of infamous education policies that consequently legalised racial segregation and a strict and specific education curriculum in apartheid South Africa (Eybers, 2019; Gallo, 2020). Other notable portions of this Act included the stripping of all control of education from the provinces and provincial councils, placing it all in the central government (Molobi, 2024).

Most importantly, the Minister of the newly created Bantu Education Sector was given the power to prescribe what courses could be taken in Bantu schools, what language these courses were taught in, and how much funding Bantu schools received (McKenzie, 2021). Notably, this section of the Bantu Education Act gave the government complete control over the education curriculum of all Black South African students in the Union of South Africa, which resulted in the creation of a special curriculum for Black South African students (Nkabinde, 2016). The education curriculum under Bantu Education was created to teach and train Black South African students for job opportunities related to unskilled labour (Masinire, 2020).

One of the notable events that sparked language as a site of resistance in South Africa was the 1976 Soweto Uprising. While the immediate catalyst for the protest was the apartheid government's mandate to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, the rebellion was a definitive rejection of the entire Bantu Education system and its foundational goal of linguistic and intellectual oppression. Rooted in this broader context, the policy was met with fierce opposition as students rejected Afrikaans as the paramount symbol of colonial domination, and demanded the right to be taught in their mother tongues (Reagan, 2019). Even though the protests were brutally suppressed, they nevertheless exposed the intersection of language, power, and epistemic violence—galvanising global condemnation of apartheid and reaffirming education as a battleground for liberation (Kamanga, 2019). Therefore, the enforcement of Afrikaans as a tool of linguistic oppression not only stripped Black students of their right to education in their mother tongues, but also weaponised language as a means of intellectual deprivation, reinforcing apartheid's broader agenda of epistemicide (Hall & Tandon, 2017), which is an act of killing and devaluing the knowledges of the marginalised population groups in societies.

The apartheid regime's deliberate suppression of Indigenous languages was not merely an educational policy but a tool of subjugation that has endured in post-apartheid South Africa through the hegemony of English—a language forcibly entrenched as the superior medium of instruction despite its alienating effects (Sekiwu, 2025) on Black students. The language of instruction in African schools remains a contentious issue despite an abundance of policies and frameworks that advocate for an egalitarian society with linguistic equity. In support of this view, Madiba (2012) explicitly noted that Africa stands out as one continent where students are mainly educated through foreign languages. Historically, this has always had an adverse impact on students' epistemological access and academic success. Hence, higher education has experienced high attrition rates amongst students. Prah (2018) argued that African education systems fail to be inclusive and supportive because they alienate students through Eurocentric

languages that are bestowed upon them as the only judicious mediums of instruction. He further emphasised that mother-tongue education is crucial for cognitive development and academic success. Academic success thus, is according to this paper's authors, a corollary of an education system that premises its practices on the prerequisites of academic rigour such as inclusive learning content that is open to multiple perspectives, criticality and reflectivity, varied identities, conducive and engaging learning environments, ontological development, and lifelong learning. Undoubtedly, the authors argue that the afore-stated prerequisites for academic rigour can be maintained through recognising the Indigenous languages given that they too, are repositories for learning that students bring with them to the learning environments. The asserted superiority of English as a foreign language causes harm to the education of the native students and their worldviews. On that note, Ndebele and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2019) made the point that the hegemony of English in South African universities continues to alienate African-language-speaking students, particularly those from rural and township schools where English proficiency is often weaker. In addition to the argument made by Ndebele and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2019), Makalela (2019) critiqued the monolingual bias in African education, showing how rigid English-only policies create barriers to comprehension and critical thinking. As way of combating this linguistic barrier, Makalela (2016, p. 189) advocated for ubuntu translanguaging, which he described as a

“translingual framework that is based on the African Ubuntu value system of *motho ke motho ka batho* [I am because you are; you are because we are.]”

This reflects the idea that human completeness relies on interconnectedness. Similarly, languages derive their fullness through engagement with other linguistic systems that exist in the society. Thus, the use of Indigenous languages in higher education transcends pedagogy; it propels an ontological journey towards academic success, enabling students to think, engage, and respond with intellectual, cultural, and existential wholeness. When students learn in their mother tongues, they are not merely acquiring knowledge but reclaiming their epistemic sovereignty, a right denied by the history of linguistic oppression that fragmented the connection between language and selfhood, as well as scholarly achievement.

Theoretical Underpinning

The ontological inquiry and transformational learning lenses frame this study. Carey (2023) defined ontology as an activity that looks closely into the being of a human being in a particular context. For this study, the context that is referred to is a higher education learning context. The being of a human being is characterised by inquiry. According to Carey (2023), to inquire is to seek out or investigate the being of a human being in an educational context.

Ontological inquiry is undoubtedly a process that is part of lifelong learning. This is because a typical human life is imbued with an array of activities that propel them to discover and rediscover the realities pertaining to their being as a distinctive method that unveils the nature of a human being. Ontological inquiry investigates human beings' ways of being, premised on their cosmological relationship with their world, their cultural experiences, and their traditions. In other words, human beings' ways of being are shaped by what they inherit from their natural and social worlds. Most importantly, ontological inquiry fosters the holistic development of a human being. In the context of this study, the holistic development of a student encapsulates a variety of factors such as identity, critical thinking, creativity, civic engagement, and lifelong learning capacity. These factors have a bearing on epistemological access, knowledge interpretation, and creation. In this sense, before the student accomplishes the expected learning outcomes, they must fully understand who they are, what statuses and roles inform their practices, how they learn, what their values are, what opportunities they have, and what choices are available for them. Possibly, the ontological inquiry heralds informed decisions about whether to transform the prevailing realities or retain them. Therefore, ontological enquiry creates a platform for

transformational learning due to the human yearning for discovering and rediscovering in the realm of lifelong learning. Transformational learning thus paves ways for the stakeholders to realise that students bring with them multiple ways of being and knowing into the learning environment. Kayumova and Dou (2022) referred to multiple ways of being as *heterogeneity*, denoting, in the context of this study, that a learning setting encompasses perceived differences among individual students or group of students. Thus, education, in addition to its role of perfecting individuals in the process of their engagement with their history and culture, liberates individuals from the oppressive structures of the society that deny their existence as autonomous beings (Biesta, 2017).

Based on the above delineated theoretical foundations, the authors make the argument that students' ontological journeys that are attributed to identity formation, inquiry, discovery, and rediscovery (Carey, 2023) are critically navigated through their Indigenous languages. Undeniably, compelling students into monolingual education systems stunts their ontological and epistemological development, including their academic rigour and success; their Indigenous languages are part of students' ways of being. Thus, students' holistic learning experiences are inseparable from their identities, of which Indigenous languages are part. Therefore, enabling students to utilise their Indigenous languages decolonises the alienating monolingual learning spaces, and serves as an eye-opener, leading to their realisation that Indigenous languages are empowering tools for academic success and lifelong learning (Chikuvadze et al., 2025). Furthermore, the authors argue that the Indigenous languages liberate students from oppressive societal structures, such as the colonial hegemonic education systems, which impose their worldviews through the medium of their languages. Consequently, liberation opens up opportunities for transforming prevailing and historical realities in relation to which, students are as human beings in a particular learning context. Paul and Quiggin (2020) maintained that transformative experience changes a person epistemically and personally. The recognition of Indigenous languages in higher education learning spaces can transform the way teachers and students affirm the colonially imposed languages of instruction as the only languages of epistemological access and knowledge creation (Seehawer, 2018). Hence, the Indigenous languages can be valued as significant vehicles for the attainment of academic access and success and holistic human development in the journey of the quest for the being of a human being.

Language as Indispensable Part of Identity and Ontological Journey

To understand the nature of students and their educational needs, it is a wise undertaking to delineate them in accordance with their characteristics and aspirations. A student is therefore a human being who has been brought up in a specific milieu (Diat Prasajo et al., 2025; Peng & Abd Rahman, 2024). In this sense, the student's milieu shapes the student's identity. Identity comprises elements such as self-concepts, values, beliefs, and purposes. Thus, identity is a constellation of a human being's personal and social identities. The personal identity is, according to Neville et al. (2021) the belief a person has about the kind of behaviour they should engage in, or should not engage in. Such beliefs can emanate from the individual's cultural orientations regarding what is valued or not (Bakum et al., 2021). On the other hand, Haslam et al. (2022) defined social identity as a group-based identity through which an individual connects with other members of the community. Undoubtedly, cultural orientation and personal identity find expression in an individual's Indigenous language. In other words, as Chiblow and Meighan (2020) pointed out, language introduces a human being's identity to other people. Similarly, the connection of the individual with their social counterparts becomes a reality through a language.

The being of a student is an ontological journey of becoming the best person they can be. In support of such a journey, the stakeholders in higher education need to ascertain that students are empowered to be critical and reflective lifelong learners. The authors argue that lifelong learning is significantly moulded by the way in which individuals experience the world and its realities. Arguably, the worldview that students embrace hinges on their cultural identities and concomitant practices (Popescu

& Pudelko, 2024). Thus, the enablement of students to utilise their Indigenous languages in sharing and developing their personal and social identities empowers them in their journey of inquiry. This is because the student's wholeness as being incorporates their Indigenous languages, which help them make sense of the real world (Malcolm et al., 2016). Endorsing this assertion, were Barman et al. (2025) who made the point that modern classrooms feature a conglomerate of different Indigenous languages. Such classrooms should be responsive to the needs of a culturally diverse student body. In a culturally and linguistically diverse learning environment, equity and social justice are advocated for the empowerment of students. In support of this view, Ghaemi and Boroushaki (2025) maintained that learning environments that are culturally responsive to the diverse needs of students counter the marginalisation of the Indigenous students. In so doing, such an education system decolonises the monocultural hegemonies that impose their worldviews on the native students and deprive them of their full identities and ontological development. Empowering students by dignifying their Indigenous languages therefore counteracts language loss (Galla, 2016) and the fragmentation of their identities.

Recreation of Knowledge and Indigenous Wisdom Through the Medium of Indigenous Languages

By the utilisation of their Indigenous languages, students can delve into their worldviews. In multilingual and multicultural higher learning settings, students develop multiple identities due to their reciprocal relationship with one another. Potentially, in a multilingual setting, the students learn other languages. Razak et al. (2020) pointed out that while a student is learning other students' languages, they are simultaneously learning those students' cultures. In multilingual and multicultural learning environments, students' diverse backgrounds and wisdom allow for the creation of new knowledge through open dialogue. The authors assert that open dialogue serves as a trajectory for the development of new identities that emanate from the students' revelations about their worlds—revelations that are based on a multitude of human experiences from diverse perspectives. Such experiences are entwined with the Indigenous languages in which they manifest; the dialogical learning settings pave the way of transformational learning. Transformational learning forms the bedrock for critiquing the realities of the world people inhabit. Arguably, the students will become aware of the salience of utilisation of Indigenous languages as repositories for inquiring about the nature and relational interplay that exist between human beings and their ecological world. As a laboratory of awareness and action, learning environments that valorise Indigenous languages can help students realise that access to epistemology and knowledge creation influences effective learning. This will challenge the misguided practice of polarising Indigenous languages and cultural wisdoms or epistemologies.

Cultural wisdom is a vehicle for moulding the novice within a particular cultural milieu. Elderly people or parents are regarded as the custodians of culture and bearers of wisdom (Jacob, 2015; Khawaja, 2021). In the view of the authors, it is the responsibility of the higher education sector to ensure that the wisdom imparted by custodians of culture to young people permeates the curricula. In agreement with what authors have just articulated, Bakum et al. (2021) made the point that values are pivotal elements of education and related curricular activities. Undoubtedly, the education system that marginalises the cultural values that the native students bring to the classroom violates the principles of education equity and inclusivity. Indigenous languages should be recognised as veritable tools for expressing and sustainably preserving culture. Higher education therefore should not be a major contributor to linguicide, which Zwisler (2021) defined as the killing of languages through mandatory law that empowers the government to forcibly punish the use of marginalised languages in public or private spaces. Thus, this paper argues that the suppression of a language is akin to the suppression of a people given that language is often seen as the soul or voice of a community.

The function of a language as a voice of the people was affirmed by Mohigul (2025) who attested that a linguistically diverse world could create an inclusive society in which cultures coexist. Therefore, depriving the students of utilising their Indigenous languages during curricular interpretation and knowledge production or creation is akin to killing students and their academic aspirations. It can be argued that the student's wholeness is also pillared by their Indigenous language. This is because the student's Indigenous language is the language through which they are orientated to their culture and its ecology. Moreover, the student understands their language better—to the extent that it can add immense value to their academic rigour. In this way, the Indigenous languages have a potential to promote students' academic success. Hence, depriving the students of their right to education in the medium of their languages adversely impacts on their ontological journey of discovering and symbiotically relating to the cosmological world. Further, the linguistic strictures cripple genuine lifelong learning and transformational learning. Therefore, the authors assert that the exclusion of Indigenous languages as repositories for knowledge access and knowledge creation is same as the exclusion of Indigenous education. It is unjust for colonial education policies to define educational excellence solely by academic outcomes while ignoring the importance of engaging with cultural variations in interpreting educational experiences (Hughes et al., 2025).

Indigenous Languages as Catalysts for Transformation

In the South African higher education landscape, Indigenous languages often serve as transformative tools that shape students' ontological journeys, which may include their sense of self, knowledge acquisition, and academic belonging (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). Apart from the fact that these languages are used for communication purposes, they are also epistemic bridges, enabling marginalised students to access, internalise, and produce knowledge without being obstructed by colonial languages (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). Moreover, Nyoni (2023) emphasised that when learners engage academically in their mother tongues, they not only absorb information but reclaim their cognitive and cultural wholeness, which is a foundation of lifelong learning. Therefore, this ontological shift, from linguistic alienation to epistemic empowerment, is crucial for academic success—especially in a system that is entrenched in colonial linguistic hierarchies.

Mother-tongue instruction is a key dimension of this transformation to enhance critical thinking. Consistent with this, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argued that cognitive justice is consistent with exercising the rights to think, theorise, and interpret the world, while also developing one's own methodologies from an empowered position grounded in one's identity, free from Eurocentric constraints. Consequently, the dynamics of decolonisation of the curriculum, particularly through the utilisation of the mother tongue, warrants serious consideration and promotion by the post-colonial universities and surrounding societies (Oliver et al., 2019). Mawere et al. (2022, p. 19) criticised the practice of “starting with existing schools of thought developed elsewhere or different conditions and requirements” and “imposing them on local conditions.” Curriculum transformation, particularly through the centring of Indigenous languages, is not only necessary but urgent in order to redress the imposition of externally derived frameworks on local educational contexts. This would ensure that justice and inclusivity were realised.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020) recognised multilingualism; however, systemic barriers persist, particularly in policy enforcement and implementation (Cakata & Segalo, 2017). Sokani (2024) argued that universities mainly cite issues of logistical constraints, but the underlying factor is neoliberal prioritisation of English as the language of global competitiveness. Therefore, this policy stagnation limits the role of Indigenous languages to transform education, creating a gap between official promises and ongoing linguistic exclusion. Without binding requirements, efforts to empower students through language remain incomplete. Moreover, material challenges contribute to the

exacerbation of this marginalisation through minimal academic resources such as textbooks and standardised terminology. Thus, this ultimately forces the students to rely on English, reinforcing epistemic dependency (Jackson, 2023) at the expense of the students' own ontological epistemologies. The lack of institutional investment and practical implementation perpetuates a cycle where Indigenous languages are symbolically celebrated but practically excluded from high-status academic domains (Ntentema, 2021). Accordingly, for South African universities to achieve meaningful transformation, they should centre Indigenous languages as legitimate mediums of knowledge production and instruction.

Most importantly, centring Indigenous languages in higher education is not just a pedagogical adjustment but the reimagining of students' ontological and epistemic paths. By addressing policy gaps, investing in multilingual resources, and embracing various transformational pedagogies such as translanguaging, South African universities can transform into spaces where linguistic diversity fuels academic success. This shift could affirm students' identities, deepen learning, and dismantle the colonial hierarchies that have long dictated educational operations, determining who can succeed and how. The result of such a shift could be a more equitable academic landscape, where the journey toward lifelong learning begins with the right to think, question, and thrive in one's own language.

Implications of the Study

For South African higher education, this study implies that the embracement of Indigenous languages and ubuntu-based frameworks have a potential for creating hybrid learning spaces that view students' linguistic repertoires as assets—not as deficits. Importantly, the recognition and integration of Indigenous languages in curricular activities will lead to their empowerment as tools for epistemological access and ontological development. This will end the dichotomisation of local knowledge and colonial knowledge (Mignolo, 2011). In this way, the study responds to epistemic justice by centring Indigenous languages as vehicles of theorisation, not just translation.

This study further proposes that the integration of Indigenous languages in teaching and learning is not a concession but a restitution—a return of the epistemic and ontological sovereignty that was stolen by colonialism (Maddox & Morton Ninomiya, 2025). It is through restitution that higher education can truly become a site of transformative justice where students no longer navigate learning as outsiders but as whole beings characterised by their experiential ways of being. In such an onto-epistemic journey, the students can be empowered by the languages that support their histories, identities, and intellectual futures. Moreover, this has a potential of enhancing students' cognitive abilities. The journey towards academic empowerment and academic success, then, must begin with the right to learn, think, and confidently thrive in one's own vernacular (Jacob et al., 2019). Therefore, it is the duty of higher education practitioners to ensure that the policies and laws that promote the use of Indigenous languages in education are practically implemented. Ultimately, the authors recommend that it is high time for education practitioners to consider the significance of the Indigenous languages in preserving cultural knowledge through enabling the students to utilise them to prosper educationally.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the role of Indigenous languages in shaping the ontological and epistemic journeys of students in South African higher education. By interrogating the colonial roots of linguistic marginalisation and its enduring legacy in neoliberal educational policies, the authors have demonstrated how the hegemony of English perpetuates epistemic injustice, cognitive dispossession, and academic alienation. Centring Indigenous languages in learning environments emerges not merely as a pedagogical alternative but as a decolonial imperative—a decolonial imperative that affirms students' identities, enables epistemic access, and fosters transformative learning. The apartheid regime's deliberate suppression of Indigenous languages through the Bantu Education Act (Government of the

Union of South Africa, 1953) and the violent enforcement of Afrikaans (as epitomised by the 1976 Soweto Uprising) established an enduring system of linguistic oppression. Post apartheid, the uncritical adoption of English as dominant medium of instruction has reproduced these inequities. This seems to be the act of deliberately ignoring the reality of the South African past, which was infested with a variety of social injustices that compromised the equitable onto-epistemic development of the South African higher education students. The paper therefore has demonstrated alignment with the views of scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Makalela (2019) who argued that true transformation requires dismantling the coloniality of language where Eurocentric monolingualism is equated with intellectual legitimacy. The authors have argued that the recognition of Eurocentric monolingualism and concomitant worldview as the core for intellectual legitimacy is a fallacy that intends to psychologically manipulate Africans for Eurocentric gains and supremacy.

The Indigenous languages are not neutral channels of communication but repositories of worldviews, cultural memory, and cognitive frameworks. When students engage with academic content in their mother tongues, they experience what Nyoni (2023) termed “cognitive wholeness,” which is a synergy between identity, critical thought, and knowledge production. This aligns with the ubuntu translanguaging framework (Makalela, 2016), which posits that multilingualism is not additive but a fundamental of human interconnectedness. By marginalising these languages, institutions deny students their right to think independently, which stifles both academic success and lifelong learning. While the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020) committed to multilingualism, the authors have argued that the implementation thereof remains superficial and elusive. Neoliberal pressures prioritise English as the language of global capital while logistical challenges, such as the lack of standardised terminology or textbooks, further entrench exclusion. Yet, as this paper highlights, transformative models involving translanguaging pedagogies, multilingual glossaries, and community-engaged curriculum design (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020) demonstrate how Indigenous languages can coexist with global demands without being subordinated to them. The coexistence of languages, therefore, has the potential of sustaining students’ ontological beings in their journey towards attaining academic success. Students should be afforded the opportunity to integrate their inherited knowledge and traditions with global perspectives thus facilitating their holistic, transformative journeys.

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Book Review

Implementing and Promoting Multilingualism: Speaking Through Different Tongues in South African Higher Education Spaces

Edited by Nomalungelo Ngubane, Berrington Ntombela, and Hloniphani Ndebele University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2024

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Introduction

The new South Africa inherited a history of linguistic marginalisation, and the dawn of democracy ushered in a period of redressing and reclaiming African languages to their rightful place. The country has had to live its true multilingual nature, a project that continues to evade former colonial states. True to the commitment of a linguistically equitable society, this collection of research papers, written in isiZulu, Sesotho sa Leboa, and Sesotho, amongst other Indigenous languages, argues for the centrality of multilingualism as means of intellectualising, utilising, and developing African languages.

The book has been published in the nick of time because technology within the current South African dispensation is rapidly developing and therefore requires a new and equivalent terminology to be created in African languages. This is indeed the time when terminology in the world of work, as well as in science, requires new terms to develop a metalanguage that can effectively explain the phenomena underlying any form of science.

Broad Thoughts About the Book

From the outside cover of the book, one does no shadow of doubt that readers will be impressed by how immaculately it has been structured and arranged in various African languages. The book succeeds in promoting the idea that multilingualism plays a pivotal role in guaranteeing development and success in various forms of readership, teaching, and learning.

Readers can drink deeply from the well of knowledge presented by the editors of this book, drawing on the wealth of significant and original insights embedded within it. Reading the contents of this book, it becomes crystal clear that it stands as an immense contribution not only to the existing body of knowledge, but also as a source of new opportunities for students, lecturers, budding authors, language practitioners, and language patriots in general. From an academic perspective, readers have good reason to devote their time to reading and rereading this book. In fact, doing so would be meaningful not only for lecturing staff and students at various institutions of higher learning, but also for the general reading public.

As languages are in a constant state of flux and develop on daily basis over time and context, it is important to have books of this nature to alert readers about the role of multilingualism within the current

South African academic dispensation. Reading this book further, one realises that huge strides have been made not only in the development of multilingualism in South Africa, but also in the promotion of African languages as tools for both linguistic and cultural transference.

Comments on Improving the Second Edition of the Book

As a matter of necessity, it is advisable that, in the second edition of this book, specific languages be clearly indicated in the Table of Contents and at the beginning of each chapter. In doing so, readers would more easily recognise and locate their target languages. Otherwise, the book is clearly structured and presented across all eleven African languages. It is apparent that great efforts have been made to collect broad and relevant data as content for the book. Indeed, the text has been logically compiled, meticulously researched, and outlined with references appropriately acknowledged in each language.

A Word to the Reading Public

Within the teaching and learning scenarios in South African institutions of higher learning, the question of multilingualism is fundamental and must be regarded with the utmost seriousness. The success of education—encompassing teaching activities, students' academic performance, research output, and creative writing—depends directly on the development, implementation, promotion, and sustained practice of multilingualism.

The Book and Its Anticipated Impact on Translation Theory and Practice

Many translation scholars believe that translation can be understood as the “house in which we live,” meaning that translation plays a significant role in life, and must be developed at all costs. Therefore, by implementing and promoting multilingualism, translation as both an art and a science can be developed to enhance accessibility and effective communication among various language speakers within our country and internationally. Higher education institutions that offer courses in translation theory and practice would certainly benefit from adopting multilingualism as a key foundation of translation studies.

Conclusion

The book is unique and will surely pave the way for readers to recognise the importance of implementing and promoting multilingualism alongside development of technological and scientific terminology. As already indicated, the importance of this publication will have far-reaching implications across various spheres of life. It is hoped that this collection of scholarly essays will contribute to the intellectualisation of African languages as viable tools for academic engagement in higher education. This book is a step towards the practice of multilingualism in higher education and, we hope, to inspire other sectors to follow. A commitment to multilingualism has never been more urgent.

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Conference Report

ALASA Conference: African languages beyond expansion and preservation in the digital age

Polokwane Royal Hotel, Polokwane, South Africa
08-11 July 2025

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The 26th International Conference of the African Language Association of Southern Africa (ALASA) was held at Polokwane Royal Hotel, Polokwane, from Tuesday, 08 July to Friday, 11 July 2025.

The theme, African Languages Beyond Expansion and Preservation in the Digital Age, highlighted the urgent need to advance African languages from mere preservation and expansion to active scholarship in academic spaces. It provided delegates the opportunity to demonstrate the maturity of African languages for such endeavours from the perspectives of literature, translation terminology and lexicography, language policy and planning, language in society, language and decolonisation, language and technology, and theoretical linguistics. The conference engaged with issues around language policy; languages of learning, teaching, and science; Indigenous African languages online; and localised digital content. There were 211 paper presentations and five keynote addresses. The conference sub-themes were:

- The literature and literary scholarship of African languages.
- The language of languages in translation, terminology, and lexicography.
- The implications of language planning in African languages development and strengthening.
- Societal forces in communities and elitist structures of education in the utility of African languages.
- The development and strengthening of African languages in the digital space.
- Structural systems of African languages.

Keynote Speakers

There were five keynote speakers drawn from different aspects of African language focus and specialisation, and all keynote addresses were of high quality.

William Jethro Mpofo

The opening keynote address was delivered by William Jethro Mpofo, a researcher and Teaching and Learning Coordinator at the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He emphasised the decolonial urgency of addressing the marginalisation of African

languages in the intellectual space. He advocated negotiating African space within the Eurocentric knowledge economy, noting that many European advances have their roots in African origins.

Monicca Thulisile Bhuda

Monicca Thulisile Bhuda, an expert in Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), currently attached to the University of Mpumalanga, delivered a scintillating address on the centrality of language as a vehicle for IKS. Her address was contextualised in isiNdebele, one of the minority African languages whose development requires urgent acceleration. She charged the delegates to embrace the African ethos to sustain a balanced identity and redress distorted conceptions of Africanness.

Kwesi Kwaa Prah

Kwesi Kwaa Prah, Emeritus Professor, founder and former Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) based in Cape Town, bemoaned the sorry state of African languages, shaped by fragmented orthographies crafted by missionaries as part of their complicit colonial agenda. His address reminded the conference of the unfinished project of harmonising the orthography of African languages to increase literacy levels and increase their utility as languages of science, technology, and intellectual pursuit.

Nomalungelo Isabel Ngubane

Nomalungelo Isabel Ngubane, Director, Academy for Multilingualism, University of the Free State, shared her experiences in the implementation of the language policy mandate. She underscored the importance of not waiting for all resources to be available, but of always starting somewhere, with the principal aim of contributing to the development of African languages and providing access to the many students for whom the dominant language is a barrier to education.

Tshisikhawe Dzivhani

Tshisikhawe Dzivhani—an accomplished South African Sign Language (SASL) interpreter and former SASL lecturer with over a decade of experience in language facilitation, curriculum development, and Deaf community advocacy, currently based at the Reakgona Disability Centre, University of Limpopo—explained the conditions experienced by the Deaf community in many sectors of society. She explained how the shortage of SASL interpreters marks the exclusion of the Deaf community.

Impressions of Some Paper Presentations

The presentations were interactive and marked a truly multilingual setting. Presenters used Northern Sotho, Xitsonga, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Tshivenda, siSwati, and isiNdebele in addition to English. There were robust debates, which were beneficial for many postgraduate students who presented their master or doctoral projects.

There was a good balance of papers from literary studies and language focus. There were also veteran scholars from across the length and breadth of South African universities and neighbouring SADEC institutions alongside novice researchers who were being inducted into academia. Some presenters came from government departments and agencies, and brought a nuanced perspective on the state of African languages.

Some presenters grappled with the African scholarship from the perspective of classic literary giants whilst others delved into the current digital space and the positioning of African languages. The common thread that resonated with most presenters was the viability of African languages and the dismantling of the fallacy of inadequacy. As such, presenters touched on educational, identity, economic, cultural, political, and linguistic issues from the central position of African languages.

Organisation

The ALASA Local Organising Committee of the 2025 conference was superb. With the setbacks of having to change the conference venue twice, they managed to find Polokwane Royal Hotel—a far better alternative for the conference. What more, Polokwane Royal Hotel offered to shuttle delegates from across Polokwane City to the conference venue. This came as a huge relief for the majority of the delegates

who would have incurred extra transport costs and inconvenience. The shuttle service was available in the morning and afternoon for the duration of the conference, which allowed delegates to attend conference events that were scheduled late in the night.

Food

The conference provided for morning and afternoon tea, and lunch for all delegates for the duration of the conference. The gala dinner was sponsored by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture in Limpopo. This was indeed meticulously executed at the level of royalty.

Entertainment

The disc jockey treated the delegates with local music genres, who could not resist swaying this way and that with the rhythmic sounds of Africa. These were interspersed with contemporary genres that almost sent the young at heart into uncontrollable jives.

Areas for Reconsideration

One keynote speaker presented online, which limited engagement with participants. This was mainly due to audibility on both ends, with the speaker unable to hear the questions raised by delegates. Being physically present would have enhanced the engagement and made the interactions more useful.

It was noted that the programme was not user-friendly for the delegates. There were a number of presenters who appeared in the programme but were physically absent from the conference. Unfortunately, some delegates who were present in the conference did not feature in the programme despite being promised inclusion in the revised version. One such delegate stayed the entire conference and ended up not presenting. This reflected negatively on the LOC.

Whilst it may not be within the powers of the LOC to designate breakaway session rooms, it was noted that some venues were inconveniently placed such that to access them, you needed to go past another venue in session. This had a bearing on the attendance of certain sessions. Thus, some delegates ended up presenting in venues that were not allocated for them in the programme, which conflicted with other presenters. Perhaps, it would be helpful to have a programme team that ascertains that all delegates' requirements match venue allocations, and that venues themselves are suitable and not inconveniently placed.

Despite the few glitches, the conference was overall, a worthwhile experience and engagement of minds in the timely subject of the utility of African languages.