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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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