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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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