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Theorising Views of Bilingual/Multilingual Undergraduate Students on English-Medium Policy at a University in South Africa[8]

Julliet Munyaradzi
ORCID No: 0000-0002-4928-1451
University of Johannesburg
jmunyaradzi@uj.ac.za / jumunyah@gmail.com

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 a 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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