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## **Conference Report**

### **Reimagining Teacher Education and Knowledge Production Inaugural CALT (Centre for African Language Teaching)**

**University of the Western Cape, South Africa**  
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During 2025, Centre for African Language Teaching (CALT) hosted a series of interconnected scholarly engagements under the theme, *Ukumiliselwa kwisiXhosa: Ukucinga Ngokutsha Ngemfundo Yootitshala Kunye Nokoveliswa Kolwazi (Rooted in isiXhosa: Reimagining Teacher Education and Knowledge Production)*. These engagements included a pre-conference webinar in August, and the Inaugural CALT Conference in October. Together, they created a sustained platform for dialogue, reflection, and collaboration. This report provides a comprehensive account of the CALT 2025 pre-conference and conference events by analysing their contributions to ongoing debates on multilingual education and decolonial pedagogy. It further reflects on the broader implications of these engagements for the future of African language education in South Africa and beyond.

The discussions across the CALT engagements were underpinned by a shared commitment to decolonisation and epistemic justice. Decolonisation, in this context, extends beyond curriculum reform to include the transformation of the linguistic and epistemological foundations of higher education. It requires a fundamental rethinking of what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is valued, and in which languages knowledge is produced and disseminated. Language plays a critical role in this process. As a medium of instruction and a carrier of culture, language shapes how individuals understand and engage with the world. The dominance of colonial languages in education systems has historically marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Reclaiming African languages, therefore, is not only about linguistic inclusion but also about restoring epistemic agency.

Multilingualism emerges as a key strategy in this regard. Rather than viewing languages as competing entities, multilingual approaches recognise the value of linguistic diversity and promote the use of multiple languages in teaching and learning. This includes practices such as translanguaging, which enables learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning. The CALT pre- and main conferences highlighted the importance of integrating African languages into all aspects of academic life, including curriculum design, research, and digital innovation. They also emphasised the need for collaboration between institutions, communities, and policymakers to achieve sustainable change.

The pre-conference webinar, held on the 13 August 2025, served as an important precursor to the main conference programme. Conducted virtually, it brought together 72 participants from across South Africa, representing a diverse range of disciplines and professional backgrounds. The primary objective of the webinar was to initiate dialogue on the role of African languages in education, with a focus on curriculum development, research, supervision, and internationalisation. It also aimed to create a collaborative

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network of scholars and practitioners committed to advancing African language education. The webinar featured a series of presentations that addressed both theoretical and practical dimensions of African language education.

Dr Nikiwe Nondabula opened the session by situating the discussion within decolonial theory, emphasising the need to reclaim Indigenous epistemologies. Professor Rajendra Govender reinforced institutional commitment to African languages, and Professor Ayub Sheik's keynote addressed language displacement and its consequences. Subsequent presentations by Professor Nokhanyo Mdzanga, Dr Simthembile Xeketwana, Dr Dolly Dlavane, and Dr Mosa Nontsikelelo Khasu expanded on curriculum transformation, technology integration, systemic challenges, and digital innovation. These contributions collectively highlighted the intersection of pedagogy, policy, and technology.

One of the central themes of the pre-conference programme was curriculum transformation that focused on presentations highlighting the significance of mother-tongue instruction for enhancing cognitive development, improving learning outcomes, and fostering cultural identity. Participants argued that integrating African languages into the curriculum is essential for creating inclusive and equitable education systems. Another key theme, which focused on the internationalisation of African languages, highlighted the growing recognition of African languages in global academic and digital spaces. The integration of isiXhosa into translation platforms and the use of digital tools to enhance the language were identified as significant steps towards increasing its visibility, accessibility, and use.

The webinar also addressed institutional challenges, including the lack of adequately trained educators, limited teaching resources, and insufficient policy support. These challenges were identified as major barriers to the effective implementation of multilingual education. A particularly notable aspect of the webinar was its focus on digital innovation. Presenters explored the potential of artificial intelligence and digital technologies in advancing African language teaching and research. This included the development of digital learning tools, multilingual publishing platforms, and online resources. The discussion of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) further emphasised the importance of documenting and sharing innovative practices in multilingual pedagogy. The pre-conference webinar successfully established a collaborative intellectual platform for ongoing engagement, fostered a sense of shared purpose among participants, and laid the foundation for deeper discussions at the conference. Importantly, it demonstrated the potential of virtual platforms in expanding access to scholarly dialogue.

The Inaugural CALT Conference, held on 16 and 17 October 2025, marked a historic milestone in the field of African language education. Bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, the conference provided a platform for in-depth engagement on key issues related to multilingualism, pedagogy, and policy. The focus of this conference was an interrogation of the following 6 themes, which provided an excellent context for the exploration of some of the key issues to be considered when African languages are used as medium of instruction in teacher education programmes and knowledge production in various contexts:

- The Decolonial Imperative and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. South African curricula need urgent decolonisation to move away from Eurocentric perspectives that marginalise African experiences. Scholars advocate integrating Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)—such as African dilemma tales—as counter-narratives that validate cultural wisdom. In visual arts and early childhood development, IKS-centred teaching restores human dignity and enables students to express personal identities while digital platforms like YouTube are being leveraged to deliver isiXhosa-centred pedagogies that affirm Indigenous epistemologies.
- Language Identity and the Status of Marginalised Dialects. A significant tension exists between official languages and localised identities. While isiXhosa is mandated for instruction, isiMpondo speakers feel their linguistic heritage is treated as an inferior dialect. Communities are calling for

isiMpondo recognition and school instruction to preserve cultural identity and end linguistic oppression.

- **Multilingualism and Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE).** The 2025 implementation of MTBBE represents a shift toward using African languages alongside English for subjects like science and mathematics from Grade 4 onwards. Translanguaging supports knowledge construction and elevates African language status, while innovative tools such as AI-powered chatbots and multilingual glossaries are being developed to provide academic support and reduce cognitive load for non-English speakers.
- **Addressing the Literacy Crisis and Orthographic Mastery.** South Africa struggles with persistent low literacy levels, with many Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and limited parental involvement are key barriers, while reading clubs and enjoyment-based campaigns are proposed solutions. Systematic teaching of isiXhosa orthography is required because undergraduate students show persistent errors stemming from Foundation Phase curriculum gaps.
- **Bridging the Gap in Teacher Education.** A critical disconnect exists between English-centric university training and schools' linguistic realities. Pre-service teachers feel unprepared to teach complex subjects in isiXhosa due to lack of technical vocabulary and confidence. Recommended reforms include explicit instruction in the language of instruction, embedding isiXhosa linguistics modules before teaching methods, and developing bilingual training materials and videos.
- **Gender, Representation, and Social Transformation.** Education serves as a site for social transformation regarding gender and leadership. Research in Eastern Cape primary schools shows teachers believe girls can lead, yet institutional norms perpetuate patriarchal masculine leadership styles. Literature studies advocate challenging the marginalisation of women in traditional and Christian frameworks by promoting and acknowledging the significant role that women can play in these positions.

Day 1 of the conference featured a keynote address by Professor Ralarala, who called for structural transformation in universities, which set the tone for a range of presentations that challenged participants to move beyond symbolic gestures towards meaningful and sustained transformation. Nelson Mandela University's Faculty of Education was well represented by Mrs Manakele, who presented a paper on "The Use of isiXhosa Literature as a Pedagogical Tool to Teach isiXhosa to non-isiXhosa speakers in Education," Ms Peteni, who presented a paper on "Reimagining isiXhosa Pedagogies: Decoloniality and Early Language Acquisition on YouTube series Multilingual Minds Language Learning with Sis' Bongo," and Dr Ismail, who presented a paper on "Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for Student Success, Translanguaging and Social Justice." These papers were well received by a receptive and engaging audience.

On Day 1 of the conference, speakers emphasised the need to recognise African languages as legitimate mediums of academic discourse. They argued that languages such as isiXhosa possess the capacity to express complex ideas in fields such as science, philosophy, and technology. A major highlight was the panel discussion titled: "Envisioning CALT Centres in the Context of Multilingual-Based Bilingual Education, AI Technologies, and STEAM Competencies," facilitated by Professor Mdzanga and which included Professors Bayaga, Govender, and Kwatsha, and Drs Tyler and Guzula as panelists.

Day 2 of the conference featured a powerful keynote by Dr Tshongolo titled: "The Scares of the Tongue," which examined the psychological and historical impact of linguistic marginalisation by framing decolonisation from the perspectives of intellectual and emotional restoration. This was followed by an

interactive workshop led by Drs Tyler and Xeketwana, which provided participants with practical tools for implementing multilingual teaching strategies. The focus on translanguaging as a structured pedagogical approach was particularly significant.

Participants engaged in activities such as bilingual concept mapping and collaborative translation, which demonstrated the potential of multilingual approaches in enhancing learning outcomes. The conference also recognised the emotional and cultural dimensions of language. Presentations highlighted the role of language in shaping identity and fostering a sense of belonging, thereby recognising the emotional and cultural dimensions of language.

Cultural activities during the gala dinner included presentations that reinforced the significance of celebrating linguistic diversity and cultural heritage within the context of African language teaching and learning. These discussions also highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing the challenges of language integration in higher education. The CALT events incorporating the pre-conference webinar and the stimulating conference programme, highlighted the transformative potential of African languages in education by focusing on themes such as decolonisation, multilingual pedagogy, and the integration of technology. The speakers' contributions and insights demonstrate a shared commitment to advancing isiXhosa as a language of knowledge production.

The emphasis on community engagement and policy alignment reflects a holistic approach to language development, which will make a meaningful contribution to broader efforts to achieve linguistic justice and educational equity. Furthermore, the conference demonstrated the potential of African languages to serve as powerful tools for knowledge production and educational transformation. As institutions continue to grapple with the challenges of decolonisation, initiatives such as these, led by CALT, provide valuable insights and practical guidelines for the promotion and development of African languages across various platforms and contexts, thereby reaffirming the importance of language in shaping more inclusive, equitable, and innovative educational systems.