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Teaching Academic Literacy (AL) in English to African Students: Thinking Beyond the Fixation on the Mechanics of the Language of Instruction

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Abstract

In this article I examine the role of English as the language of instruction for academic literacy teaching in African universities. I employ a critical literature review and a self-reflexivity lens to examine how English as a language of instruction influences academic literacy provision. To do this, I reflect on my positionality and analyse studies on the intricate politics of language in Africa, and how they both implicate academic literacy pedagogy. I argue that while understanding the rules of English is essential for clarity, academic literacy practitioners should not fixate on them. Rather, they should focus on the development of cognitive competencies such as critical thinking, which allows them to socialise students into disciplinary/university ways of knowledge production, dissemination, or contestation. Furthermore, obsessing over the mechanics of English in academic literacy contributes to entrenching the prestigious position of English in African universities while marginalising and disempowering many students and staff with different linguistic traditions and repertoires. Finally, academic staff who subscribe uncritically to this model of academic literacy teaching expose their own intellectual inferiority, maintaining the coloniality of knowledge and language in Africa. To this end, I propose an academic literacy model that focuses on the cognitive foundation of African students to ensure that they see knowledge as negotiated or contested.

Keywords: academic literacy, English language, African students, language of instruction

Introduction and Background

Globally, higher education is at a crossroad between massification, de-funding, transformation, and generative artificial intelligence (AI). In South African universities, these challenges are posing serious threats to knowledge production, and many academics are concerned not only with the quantity of students entering university spaces but also with attrition rates and/or the quality of graduates entering the world of work (Angu, 2024; Jansen &Walters, 2022; Mbembe, 2016). In academic literacy (AL), massification and the irruption of generative AI have led to students "grappling with the traditional demands of academic literacies" such as critical thinking, reading, and writing (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 300). These students not only bring different linguistic repertoires to university spaces but are also exposed to digital technologies, making information easily accessible. For example, generative AI has provided them with alternative ways to generate texts about the knowledge ecology, often uncritically or without any sense of agency. They conflate information with knowledge because they lack the cognitive capacity to see knowledge production as a process of creative imagination, contestation, or negotiation (Angu, 2024; Vasquez et al., 2019).

However, these digital disruptions remind us that we have a moral obligation to teach students about the pitfalls of generative AI and how to use it ethically and responsibly in scholarly texts (Angu, 2024; Mckenna &Tshuma, 2025; Specia & Osman, 2015). Therefore, what does it mean to be academically literate today and how should we teach academic literacy to African students? To answer this question, I begin with my own uneasy encounter with English in post-independent Cameroon and post-apartheid South Africa. Most importantly, I have decided to frame this article on the teaching and learning of academic literacy in the South African context, and I have drawn on my experiences as first, a postgraduate student and later, a lecturer for more than 25 years. Although I am thinking from the South African higher education perspective, I am mindful that some African universities have different language policies or have decided to maintain English as the language of instruction. Many of these African universities still consider English an international language that will expose African students to a world of opportunities (Hutton, 2010; Jeyifo, 2018; Pennycook, 2007; Wright, 2002).

I am not arguing that English is not an international language or the language of business and politics. Rather, I am against the fixation on the mechanics of the language and ignoring the process of deeper learning in academic literacy. In fact, this fixation reduces academic literacy to a course about the rules, structure, and technical aspects of English or what Paolo Freire (1996) called "banking education" (Angu, 2024; Julius et al., 2024). Fixating on rules means academic literacy lecturers often miss the opportunity to socialise students into disciplinary/university ways of knowledge construction, dissemination, or contestation. By doing so, they renege on the promise to increase epistemological access and develop students' cognitive competencies (Boughey, 2005; Boughey & Mckenna, 2016). Moreover, the mastery and application of English language rules in academic literacy contribute to entrenching its prestigious position in African universities while inadvertently marginalising and disempowering many students and staff with different linguistic traditions and repertoires. Finally, academic staff who subscribe uncritically to this model of academic literacy teaching expose their own intellectual inferiority, maintaining the colonial knowledge and language in Africa.

To argue against the fixation on the mechanics of the language of instruction, I employ a critical literature review and a self-reflexivity lens to examine how English as a language of instruction influences academic literacy provision (see Berger, 2015; Cruz, 2015; Fook, 2014; Jesson & Lacey, 2006; Saunders & Rojon, 2011; von Seggern et al., 2023). To do this, I reflect on my positionality—Black African scholar, non-mother tongue speaker of English and academic literacy lecturer—at a South African university. Furthermore, I analyse literature on the intricate politics of language in Africa and how they implicate academic literacy pedagogy. Reflecting on my sociocultural, linguistic, and contextual biases, I critique the hegemonic position of English in African universities and provide some critical insights for academic literacy pedagogy in the South African higher education context (Jesson & Lacey, 2006; Julius et al., 2024).

The article is structured as follows: firstly, I discuss the politics of language in African universities and interrogate the democratisation of higher education in South Africa. Secondly, I examine the role of English as both a colonial and an international language, framing my discussion around the fallacy of its superiority in academic literacy. Finally, I explore academic literacy as a mode of reasoning that can help students think critically while constructing or contesting knowledge at the university level.

While I think in terms of South Africa to ground my arguments, I do not wish to invoke the ghosts of our colonial ancestors "sleeping peacefully" because English is still the language of instruction at many African universities. I am also in no position to impose or assume that my thoughts are simply generalisable or should be applied without criticism. In fact, these same arguments have been contested at my own university, and my own thinking and mastery of academic literacy have been questioned by colleagues, including some AL practitioners, because they simply conflate academic literacy with English competence (Boughey, 2002; Julius et al., 2024). When they mark students' academic projects, they spend valuable time correcting technical inaccuracies instead of the students' critical reasoning and argumentation. This is understandable and forgivable because many academic literacy practitioners at South African universities who are obsessed with the rules of English are not trained to teach academic literacy, nor do they read or publish on academic literacy. Therefore, their knowledge of the subject is not grounded in sound, empirically led evidence. Rather, the obsession is often driven by nothing more than an imagined sense of racial and class superiority. These academic literacy lecturers do not create opportunities for critical engagement, and they often reward students who can apply the rules of English accurately with high marks (Angu, 2024; Boughey, 2002; Julius et al., 2024). For me, academic literacy is a mode of reasoning or area of inquiry with its own specific norms and, therefore, cannot be conflated with English competence (Angu, 2024; Jacobs, 2013). Critical reasoning and the ability to argue are the foundational principles of academic literacy, which means it can be taught and learnt in any language.

To interrogate why academic literacy practitioners fixate on the rules of English, we return to the question of English language in Africa, "a question that continues to haunt" many African scholars (Staphorst, 2024, p. 43). For many African scholars, English "is the most widely used language for writing on [our] continent and beyond this in terms of speaking, as distinct from writing, English is also the most widely spoken language in Africa" (Jeyifo, 2018, p. 137). This places English on a pedestal, both as an intellectual language and as a lingua franca, and institutions of learning thus make concessions that maintain its power and control in Africa (Alexander 1999; Angu, 2018). For decades, proponents of African languages as languages of scholarship have criticised the hegemonic position of English in African universities. Authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kwesi Prah, Neville Alexander and Birgit Brock-Utne have argued persistently that the dominance of English as the language of research and scholarship in African universities is about racial and linguistic hierarchies, as well as power and control. Thinking from the perspective of linguistic nationalism, Brock-Utne (2001, p. 118) argued:

The language question is all about power. The choice of a language of instruction in Africa is a political choice, a choice that may redistribute power in a global context as well as within an African country between elites and the masses. . . . Choosing as a language of instruction, an indigenous language, a language people speak, are familiar with and which belongs to the cultural heritage would redistribute power from the privileged few to the masses.

For Brock-Utne (2001), the use of English as the language of instruction limits access to knowledge in favour of the privileged and elites, giving them unchecked power and control over the masses, who could not learn the language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary texts in the later part of his career were written in Gikuyu, extending the readership to the masses. His access to the masses through his texts posed a major threat to the government of post-independent Kenya because his scathing criticisms transcended the English-speaking population. He was eventually imprisoned not because he criticised the Kenyan government but because he did so in the language of the masses (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Moreover, the use of English as the medium of instruction symbolises the resilience of colonial power and control in contemporary Africa as well as a form of linguistic injustice (see, for example, Alexander, 2012; Brock-

Utne, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2020; Prah, 2017; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Thus, these authors have advocated for the recentring of African languages as languages of research and scholarship.

Contrary to this school of thought, the likes of Chinua Achebe, Biodun Jeyifo, and Achille Mbembe criticised Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's "nativist" position as an "absolute autochthony" or attaching a language to its ancestral place (Jeyifo, 2018, p. 135). They see English not as a curse but as a resource for which we should be eternally grateful to our colonial masters. Achebe wrote:

Those of us who have inherited the English may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value, especially those atrocities of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not, in rejecting the evil, throw out the good with it (1997, p. 345) . . . I have been given this language and I intend to use it. (1997, p. 348)

Achebe's ideological position forces us to think about "what," "how," and "why" we use this inheritance because although it is a colonial language, it could be "altered to suit new African surroundings" (Achebe, 1997, p. 349). I see this altering in Nyamnjoh's (2020) publication "Amos Tutuola as a Quest Hero for Endogenous Africa: Actively Anglicising the Yoruba Language and Yorubanising the English Language." Although Amos Tutuola was not a master of the English language, he "employed his creative imagination, in conversation with Yoruba folktales, to use and appropriate the English language" (Nyamnjoh, 2020, p. 91). The idea of altering to suit our African surroundings is located in Achille Mbembe and Biodun Jeyifo's view that English is an African language; it has been appropriated and is now used as a lingua franca by many Africans. For them, the ownership of English language has shifted from the West, particularly Britain, to Africa meaning, "language is like the free market. No legislature or bureaucracy prescribes the forms of speech, the structure of the language or the vocabulary that individuals use…" (Hutton, 2010, p. 640). Language as we know it performs multiple functions in human lives. For some, it is a simple carrier of their thoughts, but for others, it is a powerful instrument that can be used to liberate, connect, and empower or to marginalise, oppress, and subordinate (Achebe, 1986; Angu, 2024; Brock-Utne, 2014; Dabashi, 2015; Mgqwashu, 2014; Prah, 2009). This is because it embodies the cultural norms, values, and identity of a people. When we interact with language in our various teaching and learning spaces, its multiple functions often shape our relationships with students and colleagues. It influences the way we construct, share, or contest knowledge. In the case of AL, the ability to master and apply the rules of English or to speak the language with a particular finesse or an anglicised accent has become a yardstick for measuring intellectual depth (Angu, 2024; Julius et al., 2024). This mis-frames AL as the uncircumcised appendage of English language, and many second-language speakers who did not have the privilege of attending elite high schools or the so-called "former model C" schools are labelled "intellectually deficient" (see Angu 2024; Boughey, 2013; Jacobs, 2013; Julius et al., 2024).

Democratising Higher Education in South Africa: The "Access Versus Success" Conundrum

In South African universities, these two schools of thought continue to shape our thinking, under the guise of democratising higher education. Research on higher education celebrates the widening of university gates and the transformation of university spaces as symbols of the "Rainbow Nation" (Boughey, 2013; Mgqwashu, 2014). We take pride in the numbers of Black students and women in certain universities and disciplines. Access to higher education is no longer a farfetched dream for many African families. While we address the issue of success, we need to recognise this accomplishment because we cannot achieve success if there is no access. In fact, access provides us with the empirical data for differential analysis that can help us understand the intricate question of success. In the same vein, access means nothing without success. What is the purpose of higher education if students drop out because of psychosocial or financial challenges, or they graduate without the core competencies or literacies that empower and allow them to participate actively in the knowledge economy (Angu, 2024; Giroux, 2010; Vasquez et al., 2019)?

During the Fallist movement in South Africa in 2016, students argued that as university access increases, they remain haunted by resilient colonial histories that promote the singularity of knowledge and language instead of epistemic plurality (Angu, 2018; Mbembe, 2016). We cannot speak of the democratisation of higher education with a monolithic curriculum that resists the entry of different knowledges and languages. Similarly, Mgqwashu (2014) and Makalela (2015) argued that the imposition of English as the sole medium of instruction, despite the linguistic diversity in African universities, limits epistemological access for many South African students. How do we justify preserving particular knowledges and a particular language yet celebrate the epistemic, cultural, and linguistic diversity on university campuses? For example, in some South African universities, transformation is still being withheld by toxic institutional cultures that seek to restore the elitism of the academy and English as the de facto language of scholarship and research (Makalela, 2015; Prah, 2009). The conundrum, therefore, is the fact that although the gates of these erstwhile White-only universities are now open to all, the attrition rate among differential groups in terms of race, class, family background, gender, and school background, still skews unfavourably towards Black students in low-income brackets. This is because although universities project themselves as inclusive spaces, unfortunately, they are spaces where your race and social class matter (Angu, 2018; Jansen, 2019; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Universities are constantly competing to maintain their status as symbols of neoliberalism and racial capitalism whose purpose is to produce labour for the markets (Giroux, 2010). Academic literacy can be used to address this problem if we shift our attention to the development and provision of core competencies, such as critical reasoning, which allow students to interrogate knowledge and the language of instruction (Giroux, 2010; Vasquez et al., 2019). Instead, we present academic literacy as an English language course, using it to predict the intellectual ability of our students. Yet, our ancestors could argue persuasively and think critically without understanding a word of English.

When these universities worry about the disproportionate ratio of access to success, they are often referring to those who exit on the other side of the manufacturing process with a degree or certificate. The concern about pass rates is mainly about the cost to the university, the decline in government subsidies, and the need to create more space for new university students. They do not worry about the quality of curricula, pedagogy, and assessment practices or about students learning in a language that can never be theirs (Brock-Utne, 2007; Prah, 2009). The unequal power of English ensures that:

In Africa the tendency has been that, when we speak of literacy, we tend to think of literacy in the colonial language. We do not seem to imagine that literacy in our languages can be of the same status as literacy in the colonial language. (Prah, 2009, p. 9)

However, academic literacy practitioners should teach African students to be critical thinkers in the colonial language so that they can challenge the unequal power dynamic instead of fixating on the rules of English. The obsession with rules and with the quantifiability of almost everything reduces university education to “banking education” (Freire, 1996), an inexplicable culture of teaching to assess or what Achille Mbembe (2016, p. 31) called the “mania for assessment.” However, higher education is expected to provide “the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be a critical citizen” (Giroux, 2010, p. 716). Therefore, academic literacy is not English language; rather, it is a discipline that “allows people particularly those who are marginalized and discriminated against in society to acquire a critical consciousness” (Specia & Osman, 2015, p. 197).

In the context of academic literacy, however, success has been reduced to students’ ability to memorise and reproduce content in English rather than critical engagement with knowledge. Because they are overwhelmed with the quantity of assessments and do not read for meaning, they seek help from generative AI such as ChatGPT, quickly discovering that these algorithms can regurgitate assignments faster. They pass these assignments on to lecturers, many of whom lack the critical reasoning to point out flaws in them. While we find ways to prevent unethical knowledge production in higher education, generative AI has reminded us that we are producing graduates who are struggling to navigate this complex and technologically disruptive world. In a world shaped by different technologies, digital literacy is an important graduate attribute and should be taught at university. Students should not outsource to

generative AI the ability to think critically, which allows them to question universities and the process of knowledge production. To democratise higher education is to reimagine universities as gateways for lifelong learning and success that offer "students new ways to think critically and act with authority as independent political agents in the classroom and the larger society" (Giroux, 2010, p. 718). For me, success at university should be about sustained transformation of lives, particularly the lives of those who still exist on the fringes of different forms of injustice. Universities should provide "students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities first to question the deep-seated assumptions and myths" that understanding the rules of English alone, makes them literate (Giroux, 2010, p. 718).

English: A Colonial Legacy or an International Language?

I see English as an international language and a colonial legacy that serves a dual purpose. Africa is home to many Indigenous languages and therefore, English bridges the communication gaps between Africans from different linguistic backgrounds. However, we cannot attribute the "innumerable works of creative writing, scholarship, journalism and jurisprudence in English, written by Africans" to mastery of the English language (Jeyifo, 2018, p. 138). It is African knowledge and African artistic imagination, and English is simply the carrier of the message. Significantly, English helps to promote Western epistemic, linguistic, and cultural domination, giving it unchecked power and control over Africa. Yet, formal institutions of learning in Africa keep making concessions to justify their attachment to English. The questions of knowledge relevance and the use of English as the medium of pedagogy have preoccupied the minds of African students and intellectuals for decades. Student protests from the 1960s to the 1990s in Africa, and the Fallist movements in South Africa, in particular, were about universities in Africa not only teaching epistemologies of the West but doing so in the language of the colonial master (see Angu, 2018; Atteh, 1996; Nkinyangi, 1991; Nyamnjoh, 2012, 2016; O'Halloran, 2016; Sooliman, 2019). The institutional cultures ensure that these modes of knowledge production persist unchecked under the pretence that a university is a global space, open to the world and therefore, we should teach in a global language. However, conceptualising a university as a global space should mean it is home to different students from different linguistic backgrounds and with different values, customs, and learning abilities. They want to belong and not feel alienated in this global learning space. An African university should, therefore, be a place where Black staff and students do not feel like outsiders trying to assimilate to Western ways of knowing and being (Mbembe, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2012). Modelled on the Western academy, African universities promise "freedom of thought only to stifle it through religiously adhering to a Eurocentric epistemology and Western-centric cultures and practices" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 162).

When we speak of an African university tasked with the agenda of taking us out of poverty, we are referring to a university that encourages "students to develop their intellectual and moral lives as independent individuals" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30). Moreover, "a university has also to be culturally close to society and . . . intellectually linked to wider scholarly and scientific values of the world of learning" (Mazrui, 2003, p. 140). University education, therefore, "is the inculcation of facts as knowledge and also a set of values used in turn to appraise the knowledge in question" (Nyamnjoh, 2012, p. 129). But we find ourselves giving in to Western education and language, falling into the colonial trap that nothing worthy of learning can come from African ways of being and knowing, or from African languages (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Prah, 2009). For the university to be culturally close to society, what is taught and in which language must matter. Similarly, the knowledge should appeal to wider scholarly and scientific values because of its epistemic plurality. Learning in one's own language and having the ability to communicate in a global language is empowering. We think, read, and write in English, but our intellectual abilities should not be questioned because of a lack of English proficiency.

The Language Question and the Fallacy of English Supremacy in Academic Literacy

Is English language a colonial heirloom that African university scholars are expected to safeguard, or is its resilient presence in African universities becoming a curse that needs to be cleansed? As stated in my introduction, the language question has been approached from multiple perspectives by African scholars. On the one hand, English is the umbilical cord of Eurocentrism, and we need to sever the cord to free ourselves from the yoke of neo-colonialism. Our relationship with English as the language of instruction is one that not only perpetuates the hierarchy of languages but poses an existential threat to the survival of our own languages (Alexander, 2012; Makalela, 2015; Prah, 2009). On the other hand, English has become a lingua franca in Africa because it is used in universities and homes and on the streets of Africa (Jeyifo, 2018). Therefore, Chinua Achebe (1997), in his critique of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's appeal to Africans to write in African languages, stated that we need to see this so-called "language of the coloniser" as a blessing and not a curse. Achebe exemplified this attitude by responding to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and exposing his pejorative representation of Africa through the same coloniser's language. Moreover, he was able to connect with Nigerians across linguistic lines because of his ability to converse in English. He further argued that contrary to claims that colonialism brought English as one of its many instruments of oppression, Africans' affinity for English predates colonialism; many pre-colonial African parents decided to send their children to seminaries or mission schools because they were desperate for their children to learn English (Achebe, 1997; Jeyifo, 2018). Achebe was not against the preservation of African languages; the Igbo language and its values and cultural norms are what made him an Igbo Nigerian. Rather, he was arguing that it is empowering to own both and not to choose.

Achebe's (1997) and Mbembe's (2016) perspectives rested on the assumption that English is an international and global language but can be localised to connect people across race, class, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. We are reminded that Africans owe their survival in the global world to the English language and, most importantly, that English is the language of opportunities in business and politics. The argument against mother-tongue instruction is that Africans will struggle to access job opportunities globally (Pennycook, 2007; Wright, 2002). The international status of English is not under scrutiny. On the contrary, we should not shower praises on the calabash carrying the palm wine but on the palm wine tapper whose name is known beyond his village because of the quality of his palm wine. Mbembe is a world-renowned public intellectual because of his philosophical insights and not simply because he is able to transmit his ideas and thoughts about the world in fine English and French. I do not think he owes his critical and humanised approach to this complex world to the French language. Similarly, it is insulting to an African literary luminary like Achebe to attribute his artistic prowess to his ability to communicate fluently in English. In a global world still ordered according to racial, linguistic, and social hierarchies, it is a fallacy to think that an African graduate's Englishness is the key to navigating the challenges of a global space.

The global world, which assumes that one can only belong to it if one speaks English fluently and with a particular accent, elevates English to an unreasonably superior position (Brock-Utne, 2001; Pennycook, 2007; Prah, 2017). African students need critical reasoning and not English language fluency to navigate a global world that seeks to reject rather than embrace alternative languages and ways of knowing and being. In the process of knowledge construction, African students need the cognitive foundation to question and challenge the stereotype that one's intellectual ability is based on "epistemic fiction rather than a scientific description of the correlation between 'race' and intelligence" (Dabashi, 2015, p. xiii). Perhaps the anxieties of students are not so much about communication but a lack of the core competencies to conceptualise, develop, and defend an argument in any language and demonstrate mastery of a specific field or knowledge area.

Academic Literacy as a Mode of Critical Reasoning in Higher Education

Academic literacy at the higher education level is about critical thinking, reading, and writing. Thinking about reading and writing, Boughey and Mckenna (2016, pp. 5–6) argued:

Academic literacy courses often focus on grammar or language structure such as structuring an essay around an "introduction," "body" and "conclusion." While technical accuracy and structure are important, it is the production of an argument that is central to writing in the academy.

For Boughey and Mckenna, academic literacy was essential for deeper learning, where the emphasis is on critical reasoning rather than the rules of the English language. However, how can students construct an argument in their writing when they have not been taught what an argument is? As a mode of reasoning, academic literacy should prioritise teaching African students to see knowledge as power and the practice of freedom, providing them with the capacity to challenge racial, social, linguistic, and epistemic hierarchies. It should provide them with skills to transform their material conditions in a global world that forces Africans to continue to see their epistemic traditions and languages as unequal to those from the West (Angu,2019, 2024; Giroux, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2020). This requires thinking, reading, and writing to question and not affirm knowledge from the West if it is not relevant to an African context.

This does not mean that they should ignore the rules of the language of instruction. Understanding the mechanics of the language of instruction is necessary for sharing and contesting knowledge in the academy. However, real value lies in the way one thinks, reads, and writes, whether in English or any other language. I am, therefore, not advocating for academic literacy practices that intentionally neglect the rules of the language of instruction. Rather, I am arguing that academic literacy development at the university level is an essential cognitive process that cannot simply be reduced to memorising and applying the rules of any specific language. We live in a world of generative AI, and African universities are dealing with students outsourcing their thinking to various algorithms. We have to embrace it and teach our students to treat AI as a tool to facilitate learning and not something that they use when they cannot think. A university is not a place where students come to get a degree; it is a place to engage with knowledge that develops their critical thinking, worldviews, global awareness, and ethical consciousness (Angu, 2019; Giroux, 2010; hooks, 1994; Mckenna & Tshuma, 2025). For example, instead of using AI to think, students can use an AI tool such as Grammarly to edit an already well-argued academic text.

If we subscribe to the first argument, then fixating on the rules of English because it is the language of instruction, or a global language is morally wrong and intellectually deceptive. For me, this fixation reduces the process of teaching and learning academic literacy to banking education (Freire, 1996). This takes away the opportunity to approach knowledge acquisition and application through academic literacy as a transformative and liberatory practice (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). It devalues academic literacy courses, and lecturers often miss the opportunity to socialise students into disciplinary/university ways of knowledge construction, dissemination, or contestation. By doing so, they renege on the promise to increase epistemological access and develop students' cognitive competencies (Angu, 2024; Clarence & Mckenna, 2017; Mgqwashu ,2014). Fixating on the mastery and application of English contributes to entrenching the language's prestigious position in African universities while inadvertently marginalising and disempowering many students and staff with different linguistic traditions and repertoires (Alexander, 1999, 2012; Prah, 2009, 2017). Finally, academic staff members who subscribe to this model of academic literacy, which fixates on the rules of English expose their own intellectual inferiority. This inferiority contributes to maintaining the coloniality of knowledge and language in Africa.

Concluding Thoughts

Thinking, reading, and writing at the university level are more about value and less about rules. For students to produce a valuable text, they need the cognitive ability to see the creation of knowledge as imaginative, negotiated, or contested. In fact, higher education is about adapting to new ways of knowing and responding critically to a variety of texts that are key to the academy and based on disciplinary norms and values (Angu, 2024; Boughey & Mckenna, 2016; Mgqwashu, 2011). Unfortunately, our students come to university unaware of and unprepared for these new ways of thinking, reading, and writing. They claim that they did exceptionally well in English at high school and are, therefore, academically literate. They usually do not take academic literacy courses seriously, and our superficial pedagogies help to worsen the situation.

The language of instruction has contributed minimally to socialise them to these new ways of knowing, understanding, and organising knowledge that are expected at the university level. Instead, it has racialised and politicised the problem of language, engendering the polarisation of academics and students. Many Black academics and students think we should use African languages to negotiate meaning in knowledge and increase access and success (Hungwe, 2019; Makalela, 2015; Mgqwashu, 2011, 2014). They are turning to translanguaging and code-switching in African languages to teach academic literacy, assuming it will increase epistemological access. Others, especially those who studied at elite universities in South Africa and abroad, still believe that English is the language of scholarship or the academy. Although the rules of English and African languages are important, it is the development of key essential cognitive competencies that will set students apart as graduates in the 21st century (Angu, 2024; Boughey, 2005, 2013)

Academic literacy practitioners see the curriculum and classroom as spaces of disruption and discomfort, where students wrestle with different forms of knowledge. When our students encounter these different forms of knowledge, we want them to form their own identities and have a sense of agency. We should, therefore, design and teach academic literacy in ways that grant them epistemological access to their disciplines and, most importantly, help to empower and transform their minds as they prepare to enter the changing world of work (Giroux, 2010; Mbembe, 2016; O'Halloran, 2016; Vasquez et al., 2019). As African countries grapple with social pathologies like unemployment, poverty, and social unrest, universities should produce graduates with attributes that can disrupt these pathologies.

We should think of academic literacy as an area of inquiry or mode of reasoning with its own intellectual requirements that can be taught and learned through the medium of any language or languages (Angu, 2024; Jacobs, 2013; Julius et al., 2024; Mgqwashu, 2014). Being academically literate at the university level is about communicating with intention and sound critical reasoning through any medium or language and to diverse audiences. It is the ability to construct knowledge that is contextually relevant and fit for purpose, or to challenge knowledge with sound evidence. Students "must assume the role of creative subjects who reflect critically on the process of reading and writing itself along with reflecting on the significance of language" (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 301). This does not simply mean applying the rules of English or any other language but reflecting broadly on the critical role that any language plays in the production of knowledge. This explains why students are able to cope with basic interpersonal communication skills but struggle with cognitive academic language proficiency. To think beyond the fixation on the mechanics of English is to reimagine academic literacy courses as essential to the development of students' cognitive competencies. This will ensure that African universities deliver on their mandate to produce graduates with critical thinking abilities and work readiness. Put differently, they should equip students with academic and professional literacies that enable them to contribute to

transform their material conditions and empower them to participate in addressing the wicked problems of the 21st century.

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