

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTILINGUAL ENVIRONMENT: A CASE OF A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper presents an observational study conducted at one of the South African Universities, which is undergoing a transformation aimed at acknowledging and incorporating indigenous languages. While the positive response to the Language Policy of Higher Education (LPHE) is laudable, certain aspects of this transformation still fail to recognize the importance of indigenous languages as sources of knowledge. The primary objective of this paper is to shed light on scenarios where multilingualism, specifically through translanguaging, is acknowledged and utilized to enhance students' comprehension of academic materials, particularly for non-speakers of Setswana who are learning the language for communicative purposes. The findings of a focus group discussion revealed that multilingual students possess valuable funds of knowledge that deserve recognition in teaching and learning contexts. Consequently, this paper emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and utilizing multilingualism not only for communicative purposes but also for academic purposes. It advocates for the adoption of a translanguaging approach in teaching and acknowledges students' language practices as a means to provide access to social justice for multilingual students. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of recognizing the role of multilingualism in academia and highlights the need to move beyond a solely communicative focus. By incorporating translanguaging practices and acknowledging students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, educational institutions can promote equitable access to education and foster social justice for multilingual learners.

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INTRODUCTION

The famous university students' uprisings that occurred in South Africa in 2017 were driven by various factors. One prominent demand voiced by the protesting students was the need for a decolonized curriculum and a shift away from the colonial medium of instruction (Ndlhovu & Makalela, 2021). Despite the students' clear discontent with the perpetuation of a monolingual ideology within higher education institutions, the prevailing norm has remained unchanged, with former colonial languages such as English and Afrikaans continuing to dominate as the primary academic languages. This steadfast adherence to a unilingual approach to education (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021) has resulted in the marginalization of multilingual students, who find their identities and unique ways of meaning-making within academic contexts disregarded (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

A monolingual ideology has been pursued in institutions of higher learning as an attempt to elevate students to a level where they attain competency in the English language. It is unfortunate that the history of the English language has shown that no matter how one strives to become proficient in the English language, they will never be recognized at the same level as the natives themselves. Garcia (2019) provides a synopsis of how the English language

acquired the high status it is accorded even today. When King William defeated King Harold at Hastings in 1066 there came the Norman Kings to rule the Kingdom of England. Norman's English speech became of paramount importance such that it became the preferred dialect of the time (Park & Wee 2012). Garcia (2019) explains that England continued to consolidate power by the defeat of the Spanish in 1588 and for them to succeed, the English language was the only legitimate way of speaking as was determined by the ruling class. For the empire to be deemed governable, the English language was used to categorize people into governable subjects that the empire needed (Flores 2013). In this effort, only white people who were born in England were native English speakers. Other whites i.e Welsh, Scots, and Irish were delegitimized by being called bilingual. When the British Empire spread its dominion to Asia, Africa, and the Pacific it gave limited access to the English language, thus they were rendered speechless people (Garcia, 2019). It was only those who were at the top of the colonial social class who were allowed to learn in English, but they were participating as second-class citizens of the colony. Mbirimi-Hungwe (2021) argues that by continuing to claim and strive to be proficient in the English language, multilingual speakers are striving to continue being speechless and second-class citizens.

The question that arises is: are multilingual students whom we find in South African university classrooms today speechless? A trace into the origins of the African people shows that African people have a way of living that they established which identifies them as who they are and possess their own speech which makes them unique in their own way. Makalela (2018) provides a recapitulation of Africa's first settlers the Khoe and the San who settled in Africa almost 1300 years ago. These two groups spoke languages that belonged to the same language family with different varieties. Later, the Bantu speakers joined the Khoe and the San around the year 600 BC. These people settled together and influenced each other in their cohabitation. Similarly, a report by Fouche (1937) about the Mapungubwe settlement explains that some archeological discoveries prove that there were different cultural streams who met at the Mapungubwe and coalesced. Fousche (1937) explains that the kingdom of Mapungubwe was formed by Bantu speaking people. This means that there were several languages that were being spoken in this settlement. When I look at the history of these ancient African settlements, I can conclude that there was no attempt to elevate any language to a higher level than the other. The settlements were based on the need to dwell together in harmony. During the Mapungubwe settlement, there is evidence to show how cultural traditions leaked into each other. Fouche (1937) reports on some archeological artifacts that were found at the Mapungubwe former settlement were also found in Rhodesia (now modern-day Zimbabwe). According to Ngncongo (1979) similarities in archeological artifacts suggest that there were shared traditional beliefs amongst African people.

In a nutshell, African people had their way of living that defines that still defines them. They used different languages that belonged to the same language family among them but could still cohabit without anyone elevating any language to a higher status than others. All cultural practices were embraced and shared among the dwellers. Therefore, contrary to the history of the English language, none of the languages among Africans rendered anyone as a second-class citizen and no one was rendered speechless as the African languages leaked into each other. I have said elsewhere (Mbirimi-Hungwe 2021) and I am saying it once more, that pursuing competence in the English language is a strive towards becoming speechless. Therefore, the research questions can be formulated as follows.

1. How is translanguaging used to recognize the use of Indigenous languages in South Africa?
2. How does translanguaging recognize the use of students' language practices to understand academic content?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design that utilized focus group discussions as a primary data collection method. According to Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, and Mukherjee (2018), focus group discussions are recognized as a qualitative approach that enables researchers to delve into the perceptions and values held by research participants. In this particular study, the aim was to gain insights from the participants regarding their perceptions of the use of translanguaging as a means to explain complex concepts. The focus group discussions served as a debriefing exercise where participants were engaged in interactive and dynamic conversations. Through these discussions, the researchers aimed to explore the participants' perspectives, experiences, and understandings related to translanguaging practices. The focus group format provided an opportunity for participants to share their thoughts openly and engage in collective sense-making. By employing this qualitative research design, the study aimed to capture rich and nuanced data that could shed light on the participants' perceptions of using translanguaging as a pedagogical tool. The focus group discussions allowed for a deep exploration of participants' perspectives, enabling the researchers to uncover valuable insights into the role and effectiveness of translanguaging in explaining complex concepts.

Research Participants

Participants of the study were first-year medical students who are taking an academic literacy course in the Department of Academic Literacy and Communication Sciences. I was their lecturer. These students are taught academic literacy skills such as reading and writing among other skills. Seven students participated in a focus group discussion. Nyumba et al. (2018) explain that the focus group discussion method obtains data from a purposively selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population. Similarly, in this research, the participants of the focus group discussion were nominated from their discussion groups by their group members to represent the groups during the focus group discussions. The broader group from where the focus group discussion participants were drawn consisted of 85 students who had participated in the main research. It is important to mention that these participants except for one, spoke a minimum of four languages. There were three girls and four boys who participated in the focus group discussion. This study reports on the focus group discussion where some participants were asked to explain their perceptions after the translanguaging exercise. In order to protect the identities of the participants, I used pseudonyms to present the results.

Research Instruments

The present study employed interviews as a data collection method conducted within the context of a focus group discussion. The interviews were structured as a follow-up to the Setswana lessons that the participants had previously attended during their first year of study. Initially, the researcher had prepared a set of interview questions to guide the discussion. However, during the interviews, the researcher also posed additional probing questions to the participants in order to seek clarification and gather more in-depth insights. The use of interviews within the focus group discussion allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and understanding of the Setswana lessons. By tailoring the interview questions to the specific context of Setswana language instruction, the study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' engagement with the subject matter and their overall learning experiences. The additional follow-up questions posed by the researcher during the interviews further facilitated a thorough examination of the participants'

perspectives, ensuring a rich and nuanced dataset. The integration of interviews within the focus group discussion provided a valuable opportunity to elicit detailed responses and gather comprehensive data. By incorporating both structured questions and flexible follow-up inquiries, the study aimed to capture the complexities and intricacies of the participants' reflections on the Setswana lessons and their learning journey.

Data Analysis

The collected data underwent a rigorous analysis process, wherein themes emerged from the rich discussions that took place within the focus group. The identification of these themes was based on their frequency of occurrence, reflecting their prominence and significance within the dataset. To analyze the data, the researchers employed a thematic analysis approach, which involved systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns and themes that emerged from the focus group discussion. The themes were determined by examining the frequency with which certain ideas, concepts, or perspectives were raised by the participants during the discussion. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the data, enabling the researchers to identify key areas of interest and significance within the participants' responses. By employing a thematic analysis method, the study aimed to provide a structured framework for organizing and interpreting the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. The identification of themes based on their frequency of occurrence ensured that the analysis captured the salient aspects of the data and highlighted the most prevalent and impactful themes that emerged from the focus group discussion.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants who took part in the focus group discussions had participated in the collaborative assignment where they discussed concepts from the text, they had read amongst themselves. The purpose of this paper is to discuss results emanating from participants' perceptions on using translanguaging to understand concepts.

Question 1	Responses
<p><i>Do you think the use of your mother tongue for discussion after reading a text helps you to understand the texts better?</i></p>	<p>Tsepo: It might not be the mother tongue maam. Like in my group we used Siswati, Xitsonga, Setswana and Isizulu to discuss the articles. Even though none of those are my mother languages I was comfortable discussing in any of those languages because you know it was better to understand the articles when we discussed in those languages than in English.</p> <p>Tumi: Yes I think if only we could discuss all we that we read in our languages it would make life easy for some of us. Sometimes we fail because the language that is used is difficult for us to understand</p> <p><i>haholo-holo ho 'na ke ne ke loana ka English bakeng sa matric.[Setswana]especially for me I struggled in English for my matric.</i></p>

From this discussion, it is evident from what Tumi says that the English language that is used for teaching and learning without allowing other languages to be used results in them being rendered as failures. The Language policy also, enumerates languages by stating that at least two indigenous languages should be allowed to be used, but Tsepo explains that he was comfortable selecting features from his repertoire consisting of other languages including Siswati, Xitsonga, Setswana and Zulu. This revelation negates the need to enumerate and restrict the use of indigenous languages to at least two as stated in the Language Policy of Higher Education.

Question 2

Do the different mother tongues spoken by you and your group members hinder your communication during group discussion?

Responses

Mxolisi: I speak 7 of the South African languages so for *nna* I do not struggle communicating with people where ever I go I *can* communicate. So I did not struggle to communicate with my group members because I understood most of the languages.

Kundai: I am Shona speaking and I come from Zimbabwe but what I have noticed is that when I listen carefully I can understand many of the languages that my classmates speak. Although I can't speak the languages but I could understand and I was asking questions in English getting responses in many languages but I could figure out what they were saying. So our communication was not hindered in any way. Though I am still learning some of the languages.

Tumi: I speak Siswati and very few people speak Siswati on this campus. So when I was allocated to a group with different languages being spoken I was a bit worried. But my group members tried to accommodate me by using Zulu. I can understand Zulu very well because it is almost the same as Siswati. *Vele* even though my group used Setswana during discussion I did not struggle to understand because I could ask for clarification where I did not understand. My group members were so caring (laughs) *sasebenza kahle ndawonye [Siswati]* (we worked very well together).

Sandile: Mina I had no problems at all because most of the languages spoken by my group members I speak them.

Lecturer: Sandile how many languages can you speak and which ones?

Sandile: I can speak all the 11 official languages in South Africa but I can also speak French and now I am learning to speak Shona (laughs).

Tsepo: *Mina ngumuZulu [Zulu]* (I am a Zulu) but many people do not know because my Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, English and Xhosa are very fluent so I didn't have a problem communicating with my group members.

Lecturer: How did you become fluent in all those languages?

Tsepo: Some of them I learned as I was playing with other children and I do not remember how I learnt some of the languages.

Lecturer: But what language do you speak at home with your family?

Tsepo: Mostly we speak in Zulu but we can use any language because my family can speak many languages just as I do.

This question sparked an interesting conversation between the lecturer and the participants as each participant brought out their linguistic identity. Kundai for example, is an international student who is originally from Zimbabwe. The indigenous language spoken in her country is ChiShona. One would expect a complete difference of Kundai's language from the other South African languages that were spoken in her group. Instead, Kundai confirms that though she could not speak the languages she could hear and follow through the discussions in her group. Kundai's response confirms what Ndlhovu & Makalela (2021) explain that languages spoken in the global South in particular have fuzzy boundaries that allow them to leak into one another as communicative episodes occur. This questions the need to separate these languages.

On another note, Sandile confessed to speak all the 11 official languages and is getting himself to familiarise with the Shona language. What is of interest is how he managed to acquire those languages. His response that he speaks all the 11 official languages shows that there is no need for formal teaching of languages just as Sandile said that he acquired the languages through interaction with speakers of those languages. This snugly fits with the analogy provided by Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021) who explain that languages practices that were acquired during the cohabitation of the Khoe and the San happened in the process of dwelling together. The languages as well as cultural beliefs as well as traditions were never taught formally to any of the dwellers but rather they leaked into each other's repertoires (Fouche 1937).

Question 3

Responses

How does it feel when you are able to explain in your languages to your group members what you would have read and understood from the text?

Sandile: Maam at first I was shocked that you asked us to use our languages to recall what we had read to our group members. I thought at university it's only English that is allowed to be used in class. So when you asked us to recall what we had read in our own languages, I felt proud of myself being able to read in English and explaining to my group members in Xitsonga.

Lecturer: But Xitsonga is not your mother tongue how did it feel explaining in Xitsonga knowing it is not your mother tongue?

Sandile:Maam to me all languages are my mother tongues because I do not prefer one language over the other (laughs) as long as I can communicate.

Kundai: I did not use my mother tongue to explain to my group members but I think being allowed to use our languages made the discussions to be more interesting.

Mxolisi: Maam that was something I will never forget I felt like very confident of myself. It showed me that I had understood the text if I could explain it in my own language. Also, I noticed that my English is not that bad because I read in English and managed to explain in Setswana.

Tsepo: Guys let's be honest everyone wants to show that they understood what they read and, in most cases, saying it in English does not really show that you know what you read. But in my languages, I can explain in detail and even give examples to help me to explain better. So, I felt proud of myself.

Tumi: Siswati was not used in my group but being able to explain in Zulu made it easier for me to express myself and explain to my group. I must say maam it feels relaxing explaining in my language rather than in English.

Results from the findings presented show that translanguaging allows for multilingualism to manifest among students. The multilingual nature of students whom we find in the classroom is not designed by the teachers, but it is a single repertoire that is possessed by multilinguals from which speakers select whenever it is suitable (Garcia and Wei 2014). Focusing on teaching students to communicate and become proficient in Setswana ignores the tenets of multilingualism. Multilingualism does not enumerate languages (Ndlhovu and Makalela 2021) but allows for languages to maintain fuzzy boundaries that allow languages to leak into each other. Translanguaging on the other hand, allows multilinguals to benefit from all languages at their own disposal and allows them to make meaning of academic material using any of the linguistic resources available to them.

Discussion

Results from this study have been presented and there are three themes that can be deduced from the data presented. These themes are: 1. Multilingualism is a reality in multilingual classrooms, 2. Language enumeration is untenable in a multilingual environment and 3. Translanguaging upholds multilingualism.

Multilingualism is a reality in multilingual classrooms

The responses from the participants in this study, Sandile who expresses that he can easily dwell among all speakers of official languages in South Africa shows that multilingualism accommodates diversity. In addition, Makalela (2015, 2018) explains the harmony amongst multilinguals to the Ubuntu that prevails among them. Kundai, a participant who comes from Zimbabwe attests that she understood [when she listened carefully] what her group members were saying in their languages. ChiShona is Kundai's home language, and it is one of the Bantu languages spoken in Southern Africa.

The fact that Kundai could follow along in the conversations shows that there is some leakages and fuzzy boundaries in these languages that make one to understand conversations. Heller (2007) explains that multilinguals possess sets of resources brought to the fore under social or historical conditions that make possible the social reproduction of new conventions and relations. Kundai as a multilingual is not a monolingual with many languages in her head. However, Kundai uses the languages in her repertoire to select features that are convenient for her understanding of the social activity taking place at a particular moment. Her ability to work in a group with seemingly speakers of different languages from her but being able to understand what was going on in the group is the Ubuntu that Makalela has been recapitulating over the years.

The Ubuntu can be traced back to the year 600 BC when the Khoe and the San settled together in Southern Africa (Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000). During the settlement of these groups of people, there was practices of each of the tribes that are seen in the archaeological remains today (Cox 1996). These remains show that there was mutual cohabitation whereby each tribe respected the other with its own languages and beliefs. When one looks at Ngcongco (1979)'s historical narration explains that there is evidence of certain traditional artifacts that show similarity with the Zezuru tribe in the modern-day Zimbabwe. Fouche (1937) archaeological artefacts also shows that during the Mapungubwe settlement, there was a co habitation between the Zezuru a group that settled in modern day Zimbabwe as well as those who settled in South Africa.

Following Sandile's revelation that all languages that were used by his group members fell within his repertoire shows that multilingualism is a reality that we as lecturers find in the classrooms. Sandile also explains that these languages became part of his repertoire as he picked them up during socialization. It also goes to concur with the argument that languages are products of social and cultural activities whereby people make meaning of their world (Pennycook 2010). This then means the acquisition of languages among multilinguals is not a product of classroom-based teaching and learning whereby students who do not speak a particular language need to be taught to speak and use the language. Ndlhovu & Makalela (2021) hasten to caution that the 'supposed' recognition of multilingualism in South Africa, particularly through the language policies is a perpetuation of the Bantu language education policies of the apartheid era which were designed to divide Africans. If languages cannot be enumerated, languages especially African languages have fuzzy boundaries that leak into each other, then it is a futile exercise to designate a particular language to be learned at a given point. It would be advisable to allow students to acquire languages through the social and cultural activities that they engage in their day-to-day endeavours.

Language Enumeration is Untenable in a Multilingual Environment

The language policy of higher education (2020) requires that institutions of higher learning should have plans that allow students to use at least two indigenous languages with the English language being the de facto language of teaching and learning. The question that arises is "which two indigenous languages should be put in the plan when in South African classrooms when there are students who do not have a language that they prefer to use over the other because they prefer using all languages at their disposal?". The consideration by the legislative framework still subscribes to the boxing of languages (Makalela 2015) instead of treating languages as resources that should not be separated but used in an integrated manner (Lewis, Jones & Baker 2012).

The example of Tsepo in this study proves that asking students to choose or the university to choose two languages to use for his academic use together with the English language would be tantamount to rendering them speechless (Garcia 2009). Tsepo says that he is Zulu and ultimately his home language is IsiZulu, but many people are not aware because he speaks

other indigenous languages fluently. Most universities including the university where this study was conducted have a silent language policy whereby they allow students to use the language spoken in the geographic location of the university. For example, Setswana is being taught for communicative purposes at the university where this research was conducted because the campus is situated in a predominantly Setswana speaking territory. In this case, the university has only selected Setswana (to be used for communicative purposes) and not for academic purposes and there is no other language used. Ndhlovu & Makalela (2021) refer to the African multilingualism where languages are interdependent and that no one language is complete without the other. This can be said in the case of students such as Mxolisi, Tsepo, Sandile and Kundai. These participants' openness to all languages coming into play for their understanding of academic material prove the interdependence of languages. Mxolisi says he speaks seven languages, Tsepo explains that he needs all the other languages including English in his communicative repertoire. If one of the languages is suppressed in Tsepo's repertoire that means his linguistic functionality is also diminished because he uses all the languages to his advantage. I would like to agree more with Ndhlovu & Makalela (2021) who explain that an African multilingual is incomplete when disallowed to use all the language in his/her repertoire including the language overlaps between these languages. African multilingualism is all about the disruption of language boundaries which make it difficult to count the languages used. The languages that Tsepo speaks makes it difficult for one to confine him into the Zulu tribe and language practices because his language repertoire consists of a variety of language practices that make him who he is.

If language policies are designed to assist African students to understand academic material using indigenous languages, then all languages should be used for academic purposes. Enumerating languages, boxing languages and tying them to a particular geographic location does not define African multilingualism but rather perpetuates a colonial mentality to African education. A decolonised higher education will among others allow for the disruption of language boundaries that were created by colonialists to divide and rule (Makoni & Pennycook 2007).

Translanguaging Upholds Multilingualism

The 21st century has seen a shift into the teaching of academic content where all languages at the disposal of the speaker are allowed to be used as the speaker/learner makes meaning of academic material (Garcia 2009). Garcia defines translanguaging from an all-terrain vehicle required to cater for the communicative complexity of the 21st century stimulated by the movement of people, globalization, and richer technology. The complexity of the 21st century even in the education sector requires an adoption of an all-language inclusive approach where not language is left behind in the teaching and learning of academic material. Research in to translanguaging has shown that a separatist view of labeling languages first language (L1) second language (L2) and home language is no longer tenable (Mbirimi-Hungwe 2020). In her explanation, Mbirimi-Hungwe (2020) brings to the fore that separating languages to be L1, L2 is not the correct representation of these languages in the speaker's repertoire. Considering Tsepo, who says he has grown up knowing that he is Zulu, however, due to a range of languages in his linguistic repertoire defining him as Zulu speaking might not be an accurate way to identify him. Sandile on the other hand, speaks all 11 official languages fluently, how does one separate these languages into L1 L2, and so forth when all are spoken with competency? The separation of languages is not the way to go but a translanguaging approach to teaching and learning.

Translanguaging recognises that languages are not separate autonomous entities (Garcia & Wei 2014) but rather it is where practices of differences and sameness occur in an apparently impossible simultaneity. Tumi says his group used IsiZulu to help him understand the concepts.

IsiZulu and Siswati are different languages that are mutually intelligible. In this case for Tumi to keep up with the groups he utilised the differences as well as the sameness of the languages simultaneously as he grappled to make meaning of the text they had read in groups. Kundai, did not have a common language that could be used except English so as the group discussed in various indigenous languages she listened carefully for sameness and as she said she understood most of the discussion. In the process she also made meaning of the academic task at hand. These participants were able to use translanguaging to shuttle between languages by treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system (Canagarajah 2011).

Translanguaging does not separate languages, it does not treat languages as separate entities that dwell in a monolingual mind, but it allows for meaning making, gaining understanding and knowledge using more than two languages. Translanguaging believes in the co-existence and eco systemic relationship between languages in a speaker's mind. Translanguaging is a tenet of multilingualism that can be used to the advantage of multilinguals especially for academic purposes.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explain how multilingualism is a reality in South African universities. The study shows that multilingualism cannot be taught to speakers but it is attained through socialisation and contact with various people. The latest and revised language policy of higher education has been brought to the fore and it has shown that enumerating languages and proposing the number of languages that may be used for academic purposes is a failure to understand the nature of multilingualism in South Africa. Findings of this study suggest that no language can exist independently in a multilinguals mind therefore; multilingual students need legislative framework that allows for such. This study shows how students were able to organise themselves and allow each other to benefit from a translanguaging approach to teaching and embraced each other. What is required is advocacy with the political leaders for them to see the interdependence of language and allow languages to be used without restrictions of one language or the other. This study requires an extension to find out the perceptions of these policy makers find out if they are aware that the current language policy framework is tantamount colonial language policy as well as conscientise them. In addition, there is need to solicit perceptions of those students who attend Setswana for communicative purposes. Further research is recommended in this regard.

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