Stakeholder Perspectives on the Integration of African Languages in Higher Education Learning: A South African Case Study

Perspectivas de los actores sobre la integración de las lenguas africanas en el aprendizaje de la enseñanza superior: Un estudio de caso sudafricano

Perspectives des parties interessées sur l'intégration des langues africaines dans l'enseignement supérieur : Une étude de cas sud-africaine

Perspectivas das partes interessadas sobre a integração de idiomas africanos no ensino superior: Um estudo de caso sul-africano

Wanga Gambushe
Lecturer, University of Cape Town, South Africa
wanga.gambushe@uct.ac.za
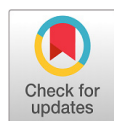*https://orcid. org/0000-0002-1627-081X*

Abstract

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa (1994), higher education has experienced substantial demographic changes. Despite South Africa's status as a multilingual country with linguistic diversity recognised by the Constitution, higher education institutions inadequately represent this multilingualism. This gap has been identified as a contributing factor to the underperformance of students who speak Indigenous African languages in higher education. Consequently, various policies have been implemented to amplify the presence of African languages in higher education. Employing a case study design, this research aimed to delve into the perspectives of diverse stakeholders in a Cell Biology module at a South African university regarding the use of African languages to support learning in higher education. Students, lecturers, and practical demonstrators were asked about their thoughts on the use of African languages to assist African language-speaking students. Findings revealed a divide in opinion, with students overwhelmingly in favour, lecturers expressing conflicting views, and demonstrators who spoke African languages generally supportive, while others had reservations. In the end, the central question posed is: Whose opinion holds more significance, that of the students or their lecturers?

Keywords: African languages, higher education, multilingualism, mother tongue, language policy

Resumen

Desde los inicios de la democracia en Sudáfrica (1994), la enseñanza superior ha experimentado cambios demográficos sustanciales. A pesar de que Sudáfrica es un

1

país multilingüe, cuya diversidad lingüística está consagrada en la Constitución, las instituciones de educación superior no representan adecuadamente este multilingüismo. Esta deficiencia se ha identificado como una causa del bajo rendimiento de los estudiantes que hablan lenguas indígenas africanas en la educación superior. En consecuencia, se han aplicado diversas políticas para ampliar la presencia de las lenguas africanas en las instituciones de educación superior. Mediante un estudio de caso, esta investigación se propuso profundizar en las perspectivas de las distintas partes en un módulo de biología celular de una universidad sudafricana en relación con el uso de lenguas africanas como apoyo al aprendizaje. Se preguntó a estudiantes, profesores y demostradores prácticos qué pensaban sobre el uso de las lenguas africanas para ayudar a los estudiantes de habla africana. Los resultados revelaron una división de opiniones: los estudiantes se mostraron mayoritariamente a favor, los profesores expresaron opiniones diversas y los manifestantes que hablaban lenguas africanas se mostraron en general a favor, mientras que otros tenían reservas. La cuestión central que se plantea al final es la siguiente: ¿Qué opinión es más importante, la de los estudiantes o la de sus profesores?

Palabras clave: lenguas africanas, educación superior, multilingüismo, lengua materna, política lingüística

Résumé

Depuis l'avènement de la démocratie en Afrique du Sud (1994), l'enseignement supérieur a connu d'importants changements démographiques. Bien que l'Afrique du Sud soit un pays multilingue dont la diversité linguistique est reconnue par la Constitution, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur ne représentent pas suffisamment ce multilinguisme. Cette lacune a été identifiée comme un facteur contribuant aux mauvais résultats des étudiants parlant des langues indigènes africaines dans l'enseignement supérieur. Par conséquent, diverses politiques ont été mises en œuvre pour renforcer la présence des langues africaines dans l'enseignement supérieur. En s'appuyant sur une étude de cas, cette recherche a eu pour but d'explorer les perspectives des différentes parties prenantes du module de biologie cellulaire d'une université sud-africaine en ce qui concerne l'utilisation des langues africaines pour soutenir l'apprentissage dans l'enseignement supérieur. Des étudiants, des enseignants et des démonstrateurs pratiques ont été interrogés sur leurs opinions concernant l'utilisation des langues africaines pour aider les étudiants parlant une langue africaine. Les résultats ont révélé une division des opinions, les étudiants étant majoritairement favorables, les enseignants exprimant des points de vue variés et les démonstrateurs parlant des langues africaines étant généralement favorables, tandis que d'autres émettaient des réserves. Au final, la question centrale posée est la suivante : quelle est l'opinion la plus importante : celle des étudiants ou celle de leurs professeurs ?

Mots-clés : langues africaines, enseignement supérieur, multilinguisme, langue maternelle, politique linguistique

Resumo

Desde o início da democracia na África do Sul (1994), o ensino superior passou por mudanças demográficas substanciais. Apesar do status da África do Sul como um país multilíngue com reconhecimento constitucional da diversidade linguística, as instituições de ensino superior não representam adequadamente esse multilinguismo. Essa deficiência foi identificada como um fator que contribui para o baixo desempenho dos alunos que falam idiomas indígenas africanos no ensino superior.

2

Consequentemente, várias políticas foram implementadas para ampliar a presença dos idiomas africanos no ensino superior. Empregando um projeto de estudo de caso, esta pesquisa teve como objetivo aprofundar as perspectivas de diversas partes interessadas no módulo de Biologia Celular em uma universidade sul-africana em relação ao uso de idiomas africanos para apoiar o aprendizado no ensino superior. Estudantes, professores e demonstradores práticos foram questionados sobre suas opiniões a respeito do uso de idiomas africanos para auxiliar os alunos falantes de idiomas africanos. As descobertas revelaram uma divisão de opiniões, com os alunos majoritariamente a favor, os professores expressando opiniões variadas e os demonstradores que falavam idiomas africanos geralmente apoiando, enquanto outros tinham reservas. No final, a pergunta central é: Qual opinião é mais importante: a dos alunos ou a de seus professores?

Palavras-chave: línguas africanas, ensino superior, multilinguismo, língua materna, política linguística

3

Introduction

This research investigates the perceptions of key stakeholders in the Cell Biology course at Rhodes University (RU). At a macro level, the examination occurs within the context of South African higher education (HE), historically dominated by English and Afrikaans as the primary languages for high-function roles, including the medium of instruction (MoI). South Africa's indigenous African languages faced marginalization under the colonial and apartheid systems, hindering their development as languages of the academy. It was only post-1994 that 9 indigenous African languages gained official status and it became possible to use them in HE. Legislative measures were introduced to "elevate the status and advance the use of these languages" (South African Government,1996, p. 3).

This study aims to comprehend the perspectives of students, lecturers, and demonstrators regarding the utilization of African languages to facilitate learning, in order to inform teaching staff, university administrators and policy makers about the best way to support English Additional Language (EAL) students. This study is grounded on a theoretical framework of the benefits of mother tongue education and fluid language use, which is a characteristic of many African language speakers (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). These key concepts were chosen because the primary objective of the study is to understand how EAL students can be best supported by giving full use to their linguistic resources.

Located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, RU is a historically white English institution situated in the small town of Makhanda. It incorporated isiXhosa into its Language Policy (2003/2005/2014/2019; Rhodes University, 2019) as one of its official languages alongside English and Afrikaans. The inclusion of more Black students since 1994 necessitated adjustments by the university to address the evolving landscape, including considerations related to language.

Rationale Behind the Use of African Languages to Support Learning in HE

African languages have not yet achieved full functionality within the South African higher education system. The choice of the phrase "full functionality" is intentional, distinguishing it from a complete lack of functionality. While students currently employ African languages in learning situations, they typically use them in small group situations, often without the guidance of a lecturer or tutor proficient in the language/s (as the data will demonstrate). It is essential to note that the absence of a lecturer proficient in an African language does not stop learning, but there is always a risk that students could share inaccurate information with each other if unguided (see Gambushe et al., 2017).

Since 1994, the landscape of the higher education sector has undergone significant changes from the apartheid era. Notably, HEI's are no longer racially segregated. Participation rates, particularly among the Black population, have seen a considerable shift (South African Council on Higher Education, 2020). Prior to the democratic transition, access to HE was dictated by race, with specific universities designated for different racial groups. Universities were categorized into Afrikaans medium institutions, English medium institutions and Black universities serving Black, Indian, and Coloured students (Bunting, 2004). In adherence to apartheid policies, historically white institutions enjoyed better funding, resources, and offered postgraduate research programs that were unavailable in historically Black institutions (Davis, 1996, Llorah, 2006).

Originally designed to align with the apartheid concept of "separate development," HE was envisioned as a homogenous space, with specific universities assigned to different race groups, minimizing racial mixing. However, the transition to democracy brought about significant changes, transforming previously homogenous universities into heterogeneous institutions. Despite the

shifting demographics over the years, many historically white institutions have not undergone sufficient transformation to adequately accommodate Black students (Muraina et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in cases where Black students gain entry to historically white institutions, which were initially established with a specific group in mind. Subsequently, the character and institutional culture of such institutions often lack inclusivity for Black students (Bangeni & Kapp, 2008), making the language factor one of the critical challenges, as all universities in South Africa currently utilize English and Afrikaans as MoI alienating those who are not proficient in these languages (Madiba, 2010, p. 334).

I contend that the consideration of the LoLT is critical in addressing the questions of inclusion and transformation. The incorporation of African languages in HE would contribute to a more inclusive and HE landscape that aligns with the diverse cultural and linguistic richness of South Africa. Mamdani (2017) asserts the necessity of institutional structures and spaces where the experiences of isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Tshivenda speakers can be theorized. This argument stems from the historical context wherein Afrikaans attained status as a language of high culture through "single-minded political will accompanied increasingly by social, political and economic power in the speech community" (Ridge, 2001, p. 26). While acknowledging that the incorporation of African languages in HE is not the silver bullet, it is identified as a significant step toward progress. Batibo (2010) supports this perspective, contending that no developed country in the world achieved its development through the strength of a foreign language.

Since 1994, there has been an expansion of access for Black students in HE; however, a persistent challenge has emerged regarding the success rates of these students (South African Council on Higher Education, 2007, 2010, 2020). The issue of success is paramount because emphasizing increased access loses its significance if a substantial number

of students, particularly Black students, do not graduate. At the exit point, white students demonstrate significantly higher success rates than their Black counterparts (South African Council on Higher Education, 2020). The existing disparities in success rates underscore the importance of addressing why Black students are not performing as well as their white counterparts and what measures should be implemented to rectify this situation. It is worth noting that the majority of Black students in the HE system primarily speak an African language as their native tongue. Given that language has been identified as one of the factors contributing to the underperformance of African language-speaking students (Manik, 2015, p. 238), there is a compelling need for a comprehensive discussion about the role of African languages in HE and how their integration can be optimized to enhance academic success. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that other socioeconomic factors also contribute to the underperformance of Black students.

The recognition of African languages as official languages in South Africa occurred post-1994 when the Constitution officially acknowledged nine indigenous African languages, in addition to English and Afrikaans. Notably, isiXhosa, spoken by approximately 16% of the population, was one of the languages included, ranking as the second most spoken language after isiZulu (Statistics South Africa, 2022). With the official status of African languages secured, there was a crucial need for policies to deepen their relevance, particularly in sectors such as higher education. The Language Policy for Higher Education (—LPHE— South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training, 2002), issued by the Minister of Education, played a pivotal role in guiding the development of a multilingual higher education sector. The LPHE is currently in the process of being replaced, as the Department of Higher Education and Training publishes a Language Policy Framework for Higher Education (South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). However, since the data for the

5

6

present study was collected prior to the 2020 document, the 2002 document will be the reference for this study (South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training. 2020). A key recommendation from this policy was the mandate for all HEIs to formulate and publish language policies specifying the official languages within the institution. Furthermore, these policies were required to include provisions for the development of African languages, acknowledging their historical marginalization. Another significant document in this context is the *Ministerial Report on the use of African Languages as Mediums of Instruction in Higher Education*, initially published in 2003 and subsequently revised in 2015 (South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training, 2003, 2015). The most noteworthy recommendation from the 2003 report, pertinent to the current study, is the directive that all HEIs must adopt one or more African languages for development as MoI alongside English and Afrikaans in the future. These policy frameworks collectively aim to foster the integration and elevation of African languages within the HE landscape.

Educational Benefits of the Mother Tongue

Indeed, there is a widely shared consensus within the scholarly community regarding the educational benefits of mother tongue instruction. According to Okedara et al. (1992), "mother tongue refers to the initial or first language of contact, naturally and normally acquired, this is a language that is acquired by one from the earliest stages of one's life" (p. 92).

The term "mother tongue" refers to a language that a child acquires naturally in the home environment from the people around them. As noted by Obanya (2004), the mother tongue is often "the most frequently used and the most perfectly mastered by the individual" (p. 5) who speaks it. It serves as the primary language of initial contact, becoming the medium through which, a child develops cognitive and affective abilities. This is because it is the language they use to grasp initial

concepts and engage with their surroundings (Batibo, 2010).

Language is the medium through which education unfolds, and the manner in which it is used to deliver educational content significantly impacts a student's understanding. Therefore, it becomes crucial for schools to ensure that students are competent in the language of learning and teaching. The mother tongue is particularly emphasized as an optimal medium for education, especially during the initial stages of instruction. By utilizing the mother tongue, schools can enhance the understanding and absorption of educational content, as it is the language most familiar and proficiently mastered by the students. UNESCO (2010, p. 31) and Fafunwa (1990) advocated for the extension of mother tongue education to as late a stage in education as possible, emphasizing its positive impact on strengthening the cognitive abilities of students. The significance of the mother tongue in the learning process is rooted in the idea that children learn based on linking new knowledge to what is already familiar to them. The mother tongue, being the most familiar language to the student, is considered the most effective medium for accelerating the learning process (Kioko et al., 2014). It serves as a bridge between what is already known and what is yet to be learned. Because the academic language may not be everyone's mother tongue, it stands to reason that a student whose mother tongue aligns with the language upon which the academic language of the discipline is based will have an advantage over a student whose mother tongue differs. This recognition underscores the importance of acknowledging and utilizing the African mother tongue as a valuable educational tool that enhances students' cognitive abilities and facilitates a smoother transition into new knowledge and academic language (Dogamo Doda & Narayana, 2015).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the importance of the mother tongue in education, particularly in the South African and broader African context, African language-speaking children

typically experience instruction in their mother tongue for only the first four years of their schooling. After this initial period, there is a swift transition to one of the former colonial languages, such as English, French, or Portuguese (Bamgbose, 1991; UNESCO, 2010, p. 6). This rapid shift occurs during a critical developmental stage for the child, where concepts are beginning to take shape, and the process of understanding them has just commenced. This phase is crucial in nurturing students and honing their concept development skills, a process that can span anywhere between seven and fourteen years (Cummins, 2009). A linguistic foundation established during this period is highly significant, especially concerning how a second language is acquired. Proficiency in the mother tongue plays a pivotal role in facilitating the acquisition of a second language. Therefore, recognizing the importance of maintaining the mother tongue during these formative years is essential for fostering a strong foundation for subsequent language acquisition and overall academic development.

The notion that students grounded in their mother tongue can learn a second language more efficiently finds support in Cummins and Swain's (1986) Common Underlying Proficiency model. This model suggests a relationship between the first and second language in literacy-related skills, positing that, although the two languages may differ in surface structure, there exists a common underlying proficiency at the cognitive level that facilitates the acquisition of a second language. This hypothesis is reinforced by Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukoma's (1976) research on the children of Finnish migrants to Sweden, which revealed that the level of competency in Swedish was directly linked to the level of competency in Finnish prior to their migration. This aligns with Cummins and Swain's (1986) interdependence hypothesis, which asserts an interdependence between the first and second language. The extent to which a student has acquired proficiency in their first language will influence their acquisition of a second language. This hypothesis holds relevance in the South African context, particularly with students who switch to English before their mother tongue has sufficiently developed. Such an early switch may leave them without fully developed proficiency in either their African language or English. Recognizing and preserving the role of the mother tongue becomes imperative in fostering a more effective pathway for second language acquisition.

Cummins (1980, p. 177) introduces the concepts of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). According to him, CALP (Cummins, 1980), pertains to "those aspects of language proficiency which are closely related to the development of literacy-related skills in L1 and L2" (p. 177). On the other hand, BICS encompasses skills such as fluency, accent, and those associated with routine conversational communication. Cummins (1980) further notes that CALP-related skills are context-reduced, while BICS skills are context-embedded. To elaborate, a student who has developed BICS in a language possesses the ability to engage in routine conversational communication, while a student with CALP can read a text, extract academic information, and make inferences using only the text, without relying on additional contextual cues, facial expressions, etc. These two paradigms have found resonance in the South African context, particularly concerning how English Additional Language students are addressed in HE. The distinction between BICS and CALP becomes essential in understanding the language proficiency levels required for academic success and effective communication in various contexts.

The challenges faced by students who speak languages other than English (LOTE) are well-demonstrated in studies conducted by researchers such as Paxton (2007, 2009) and Madiba (2010, 2011). These studies highlight that LOTE students, particularly those from government schools in townships and villages, encounter difficulties with

7

the linguistic demands of HE. Findings underscore the necessity for additional support and advocate for a multilingual approach in HE to better accommodate these students. The majority of LOTE-speaking students hail from educational backgrounds where learning was facilitated through the use of both English and their mother tongue to explain content. It is within this educational context that the translanguaging theory has gained relevance in South Africa.

Translanguaging theory encourages the flexible and dynamic use of language, emphasizing the fluid movement between languages to support effective communication and learning (Hurst & Mona, 2017). In the South African context, where students bring diverse linguistic backgrounds to HE, the application of translanguaging principles may help bridge the linguistic gap and enhance the overall educational experience for LOTE students (Makalela, 2015).

According to García and Wei:

> translanguaging is an approach to the use of language, bilingualisms and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has traditionally been the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been socially constructed and belong to two separate languages. (2014, p. 2)

Translanguaging theory has gained relevance in South Africa as it acknowledges and validates the linguistic reality of many students who speak LOTE across the country. Numerous students, both in basic education and HE, exhibit a linguistic repertoire characterized by language fluidity. This fluidity often involves a seamless transition between an African language and English or even among multiple African languages and English (the medium of instruction). In basic education, students typically receive support from their teachers in both their mother tongue and English, leveraging their language fluidity for effective learning. However, this support tends to diminish when these students progress to HE. One contributing factor is the predominant presence of

English and Afrikaans-speaking teaching staff in HE, many of whom may not be proficient in any African language (cf. Mesthrie, 2008). This language gap in HE deprives LOTE students of the linguistic support they had during basic education.

The upcoming sections will illustrate both the lack of support for LOTE students in HE and the positive impact that such support can have when made available. The exploration of this data will shed light on the challenges faced by LOTE students and the potential benefits of adopting a translanguaging approach to bridge the linguistic gap.

Data Collection Methodology

This study was structured as a single case study, focusing on the examination of the use of African languages in the Cell Biology course at RU by students who speak LOTE, and the exploration of various stakeholders' perspectives regarding the use of African languages in teaching and learning within the Cell Biology course. Yin (1993, p. 13) defines a case study as "an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context." In this particular study, the phenomenon under investigation was how Rhodes University's multilingual language policy influences the teaching and learning dynamics in the cell biology module. At the micro level, the module served as a case study, delving into the utilization of languages other than English in teaching and learning spaces. At the macro level, the study explored the broader implementation of multilingualism at RU in alignment with the university's language policy, which recognizes three official languages (English, isiXhosa, Afrikaans). Case study research, as highlighted by Thomas (2011), offers advantages such as providing a researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and enabling an in-depth examination of a specific occurrence. The chosen approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the complexities surrounding the use of African languages in the Cell Biology course and the broader implications within the context of RU's multilingual policies.

While generalizing from case study findings is often challenging, it can be plausible in the context of this study. Although the focus was on LOTE students and other stakeholders in the cell biology module at RU, the challenges faced by LOTE students extend beyond this specific case. Numerous studies, including those at institutions like the University of Cape Town (cf. Madiba 2010, 2011; Paxton 2007, 2009; Bangeni & Kapp, 2008) have documented similar struggles. The findings of this study enable the identification of patterns, linking data points to make informed generalizations. To minimize researcher bias, efforts were made to avoid attachment by limiting time spent with participants. Interviews were conducted on a one-off basis. Additionally, a questionnaire was administered to ensure data integrity and prevent selective bias in sample collection.

A questionnaire survey was conducted with the aim of gathering data on students' language and schooling backgrounds, as well as their opinions regarding the use of African languages in HE. This survey was administered to over 300 cell biology students. Questionnaire surveys prove beneficial when dealing with a potentially high number of respondents, facilitating the organization of data (Schleef, 2014, p. 43). Through the questionnaire, a snapshot of the language, schooling backgrounds, and opinions on African languages was obtained from 64% of the respondents in the Cell Biology class.

Interviews were undertaken with students who expressed their willingness to participate, as indicated in the questionnaire. Additionally, teaching staff, including lecturers in botany and cell biology, as well as demonstrators in cell biology, were also interviewed. According to Seidman (1998), interviews are conducted to gain insights into the experiences of individuals and their interpretations of those experiences. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 409) argue that interviews offer participants a chance to interpret their world and express their perspectives. In the context of this study, interviews played a crucial role in addressing lingering questions from the questionnaire survey, allowing for follow-up inquiries. Moreover, interviews provided participants with an opportunity to articulate their opinions on the use of African languages in HE teaching and learning.

In terms of data collections ethics, all the participants were asked to sign participant consent forms that displayed the following:

- I have been informed that I can stop the interview at any point.
- I have been informed that my identity will be protected, and I will assume a pseudo name.
- I have been informed that this interview will be recorded in an audio device.
- I have been informed that this material will be used for research purposes only.

Student and Teacher Perspectives on the Use of African Languages in Cell Biology

As mentioned earlier, a questionnaire was conducted to gather background information, including the language and schooling backgrounds of the Cell Biology class. The data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Student Language Profile

Respondent Options	Numbers Per Response	Percentage (%)
IsiXhosa	46	21
English	100	47
IsiZulu	14	7
Sesotho	6	3
Setswana	6	3
Shona	11	5
Ndebele	2	1
Tshivenda	2	1
Sepedi	13	6
Afrikaans	3	1
SiSwati	3	1
Tsonga	4	2
Other	5	2
Total	215	100

9

The data revealed that 53% of the 215 respondents had a LOTE as their mother tongue, with isiXhosa (an official language of RU) constituting 21%. Other African languages and Afrikaans accounted for the remaining 32%, distributed on a sliding scale from 7%. The remaining 47% consisted of students who identified English as their home language.

For this study, three lecturers were interviewed. The primary course convenor, responsible for teaching the initial segment, was one of the interviewees. The second lecturer, a Botany instructor, initiated the study upon observing a success rate disparity between LOTE and English-speaking students and sought to understand the reasons behind it. The third lecturer interviewed was the Extended Studies lecturer. Extended Studies refers to university programs in South Africa that accept students who might not have the required points to enter a degree program; those students gain alternative entry on an extended degree program in order to be given extra support. These students are enrolled in an extended degree program, attending mainstream classes while receiving additional tuition in the same course to enhance their learning. Notably, both mainstream lecturers were English speakers, while the extended studies lecturer was a Shona home language speaker.

Among the 24 demonstrators in the course, only five spoke LOTE. Two of these were replacements for others who left, resulting in only three LOTE-speaking demonstrators out of the 24. However, out of the total 24 laboratory demonstrators, only six participated in interviews. Of these six, only two spoke LOTE, while the remaining four spoke English.

This study sought to understand the perceptions of various stakeholders in the cell biology module regarding the use of LOTE in order to gauge their opinions. This exploration was deemed crucial in light of the proposal outlined in the Ministerial report on African Languages as Mediums of Instruction (South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training, 2003) advocating for the development of indigenous African languages as mediums of instruction (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2003). Consistent with this report, RU embraced isiXhosa as a language to be cultivated for future use as a medium of instruction alongside English. Beginning with students, there was a predominant inclination among them in favour of utilizing LOTE to support learning. The reasons articulated for this preference varied, with many citing perceived cognitive and affective benefits. Another perspective expressed by students emphasized language parity and equality as motivating factors.

Interviewed Student-1 expressed strong support for using LOTE in HE, sharing a personal experience. The student highlighted the difficulty of learning solely in English, leading to a point where attending classes became unproductive due to a lack of comprehension of the content being presented. In response, the student resorted to using YouTube videos in their room as a supplementary learning resource to grasp the course material. Notably, the course convenor and lecturer, who taught the initial segment of the course, also provided YouTube videos accompanying each lecture. These videos were found to be beneficial by students, as they helped to concretize abstract concepts, contributing to a better understanding of the course content. The student went on to say:

> Student-1: I think people, especially us, for people who don't understand, we will attend lectures more, because for me I was at a point where I was like I don't get this guy, like Mr. What not [laughs]. He is always like I haven't been attending lectures, because I was like I don't get why I should go to lectures if I don't understand you know, but when I get to my room, I watch YouTube videos, yea like I am able to express like you know like I don't know, like I am able to talk to myself in a way.

This student exhibited frustration with the exclusive delivery of content in English and believed that support in isiXhosa would provide assistance, potentially encouraging regular attendance

in class. Similar sentiments were echoed by other interviewed students.

> Student-2: It sometimes happens that you think you understand something in English but in reality, it turns out that you did not, but if isiXhosa was used to help you understand, you would be sure about what you know and what you do not.

This particular student viewed the use of lote as a tool that would ensure that what they believe to know aligns with the lecturer's intended meaning. Another interviewed student expressed support for lote (isiXhosa) as a way to promote language equality, rather than primarily for supporting their own learning.

> Student-4: If the university states that policy, then it is a good thing. At the end of the day the languages are parallel, they are equal.

Despite the majority of interviewed students expressing support for the use of lote, they encountered a challenge in the practical implementation of lote. This challenge arose within the context of not all students desiring the use of lote in their teaching and learning. The dilemma they faced was how, for example, isiXhosa could be integrated without causing discomfort for those who did not speak the language or had no interest in using it. One student proposed a solution in the form of an isiXhosa Academic Development class (adp). This additional class, conducted in isiXhosa, would be offered voluntarily to students alongside the standard class attended by everyone.

> Student-5: Yea and like its gonna give students more, it will motivate them in a way to go to the isiXhosa adp rather than going to lectures and stuff. They will be like you know what, I wanna go to the Xhosa adp and get excited about it. It will gain their confidence. Because now the thing is you won't be confident, like with me I am always shy to express, like my \mom would always tell me that Zintle you are good, I don't know what you are afraid of, because I am afraid of being judged. Let's say I don't get something right, I feel dumb I am like yhoo, I can't even like even if I know an answer I won't answer in class, but let's say maybe if someone answers I would be like that's my answer, so that the thing about me.

While the interview responses were predominantly positive towards the introduction of lote to support learning, it's essential to note that this data was collected from a small sample, considering the class had over 300 students. To address this, a similar query was included in the survey to canvass views on the same topic from a larger pool of respondents, allowing for a comparison between qualitative and quantitative data. The question posed was: "If I learn something in my mother tongue, I will be able to explain it better in English." This question was directed to students who indicated that they spoke lote. The results showed that 177 students responded to this question, with 66% responding with a 'Yes' and 34% responding with a 'No'. This indicated that a majority of students agreed that incorporating African languages in their learning would be beneficial.

The opinions of the lecturers were intriguing as they exhibited considerable variation among the three individuals. The first interview was with the course convenor, who expressed support for the use of more African languages in teaching and learning up to a certain extent.

> Lecturer-1: I think it's actually a very interesting question for one and my thoughts are that we really need to, as teachers we need to be understanding of the needs of our students and I think a lot of our students at Rhodes are English second language speakers. I think if we could augment our curriculum with components of their first language. I think it can only improve their learning, I am not saying we should do away with English completely, but I think especially earlier on, in the early years. Uhm, first year, second year and maybe sort of in inverted comas a "weaning" process off as much assistance but I think we should be and could be doing more to add to our curriculum.

He also drew a connection between naming animals in African languages and their inherent connection to nature.

> Lecturer-1: In terms of biology, there are some really interesting terms and phrases that come out of African languages that I find fascinating in the field I work in. Animal and plant names and how they are derived.

So, it actually makes a lot of sense when you know those terms because they seem to come from a more common-sense origin, if you know what I mean. The name of giraffe is related to what it eats and so on. So, I think there is a place for us to be using it more and especially in our foundation level courses like Cell Biology, and I think biology, in general life sciences, and biology in particular lends itself to the use of more an increased use of African languages because of how the natural world is so interlinked with community life in a lot of African cultures and I think it's a fantastic addition.

In contrast, the Botany lecturer held an opposing view, expressing disapproval of using African languages in HE. His argument encompassed two aspects. Firstly, he questioned how the use of a specific African language could function in the context of heterogeneous classes with multiple languages. Secondly, he argued that employing any African language in teaching and learning would be a disadvantage to students in the long run, given that English is the dominant language of science.

12

> Lecturer-2 Teaching students in an African language would be disadvantaging the students for longer, because eventually they are going to out in the big wide world and do things in English.

The Extended Studies lecturer endorsed the use of African languages, but akin to the Botany lecturer, expressed concern about the repercussions of using an African language with students who must operate in English globally. He believed that a scenario allowing for code-switching would be preferable. However, he also grappled with how code-switching would function when students spoke languages that are not mutually intelligible.

> Lecturer-3: I think it will be valuable if there was code-switching rather than just one language, but unfortunately by the nature of the classes we have got people who speak Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana, Sesotho, and Tsonga. I have seen those groups. How then, which language do you code switch amongst them and be able to reach all of them because when you speak Xhosa the Tswana's will be saying but sir what are you saying.

Turning to the third group of role players in the Cell Biology class, the demonstrators, their views revealed an interesting dynamic centered around an English/Afrikaans versus African language fault line. Demonstrators who spoke African languages were staunchly in favour of the use of isiXhosa in teaching and learning, while those who were English monolingual or English-Afrikaans bilingual leaned towards an English-only scenario.

For example, Demonstrator 1, whose mother tongue is isiXhosa, was asked about their thoughts on the use of African languages in teaching and learning in the cell biology module, and their response was as follows:

> Dem-1: Yes, . . . I would really love the idea of bringing multilingualism on the table because it's not very easy for all students to understand English like immediately some of them are from those schools where you don't really grasp all the concepts in English and you not taught proper English. Yea, so you struggle now, when everyone is trying to talk English, your lecturer is English, everyone is English. So, it would be good to bring maybe a second language, maybe Xhosa, which is the dominant language in the Eastern Cape. It would be good; it would be a good idea.

A similar view was shared by Demonstrator 6, who was also isiXhosa speaking,

> Dem-6: There could be a significant role that the mother tongues can play, because you find out that most of them, what I have noticed that they will think in their native language, and then try to translate that into English, and then if you try to incorporate the African languages into discussions to make them understand the concepts better, then in terms of laying it down they can revert to English.

On the other end of the spectrum, the English-speaking demonstrators were supportive of the idea of involving African languages in teaching and learning. However, one argued that this had the potential to "detract a bit" because RU was an English university.

> Dem-4: It would be good, but people who are here, where they only speak English, if they are now being taught in another language that they don't understand, so it might pose some issues, but I can definitely see where it might be beneficial, and it might be more

in a specific case or in certain things where it would be better, but maybe as a whole, I don't know. I can definitely see where it might have value, but in some cases, it might like detract from that a bit.

Demonstrator 2 had views that were similar to the lecturer who was convenor, that there is a place for African languages but up to certain a point though.

> Dem-2: Yeah no, definitely, if you need to, if someone is not understanding and you need to convey an important point, but then again, English is one of the most general, most common languages. So, it will be useful to train them in English as well, so they understand more English, but you do need to reach them first in their languages to engage them.

Demonstrator 3 had a view that English must be forced on students in high school, but also acknowledged that this is not a straightforward issue.

> Dem-3: Yah, I don't know, at school level I think English must be forced on students because it is an international language, its used internationally. So, I think, I think the focus must be on English, but it's, yeah, it's difficult to say. Obviously, some people don't have that privilege of learning English at school. So, in some cases it might be better to use other languages as well.

Students were also asked if they would be willing to use teaching and learning materials if they were made available in an African language, specifically isiXhosa. In the questionnaire survey, 58% of students responded in the affirmative, while 42% responded in the negative. In contrast, during the interviews, all of the respondents indicated that they would be willing to use learning materials in isiXhosa.

> Student-6: Yea it would be very productive if I could have a Xhosa Cell Biology dictionary kind of thing, I think it would be very, I think it would assist me a lot.

While another said:

> Student-5: Yea, I would yea, because it's gonna make me understand faster.

Data Analysis

Starting with the students' views on the use of African languages, it is significant that a student gave up attending classes because of not being able to follow the language medium and content in class. It must be said upfront that this was not a reflection on the lecturers' ability to teach cell biology; instead, it was a language and other issues including preparedness for HE. This student, and perhaps some others, who did not avail themselves for an interview, struggle because the language support that was once offered by their basic-education teachers in isiXhosa was no longer available at the English-medium university with English monolingual lecturers. The example of this student demonstrates why institutions of higher learning in South Africa must take the inclusion of African languages in teaching and learning contexts seriously.

Part of the taking for granted is influenced by the fact that those who are monolingual English speakers navigate a world in which their language is privileged, and bi/multilingual people always have to accommodate them in conversations. This tends to give them a skewed worldview in which they are unable to identify with the struggles of those whose experience in the world has been about navigating the educational world using a second language. The importance of incorporating African languages is underscored by Mamdani (2017) when he asked, "Where is the space (in higher education) in which the experiences of Zulu, Xhosa, and Tshivenda speakers can also be theorized?" He argued that, in order for Afrikaans to be a language of power and high culture, the Afrikaners brought it to the center of academic debates among other language development efforts.

At the cognitive level, the fact that this student struggled to follow in class is consistent with the BICS versus CALP paradigm (Cummins 1980). For the most part, all lectures were conducted using lecture slides with some pictures of cells, etc. Students had to listen to the lecturer and make sense of the text using the text. However, the use of YouTube videos allowed the student to move the concepts they dealt with from the abstract to the concrete level. This is in line with students who have not developed cognitive academic language

13

proficiency; they struggle to decode texts using only texts and need extra aids to lead them to the point of understanding. The question then is, would the use of isiXhosa mean that students will suddenly develop CALP in English or isiXhosa? The answer to the question is they probably won't, but students, like this one, have come through the translanguaging pedagogy that is unrecognized officially in the schooling environment but is applied by teachers.

Through the use of both English and isiXhosa, students would be allowed to use all of their language resources; they can reach into their common underlying proficiency to get what they need to make sense of the work in any of the two languages. Mamdani speaks about incorporating African languages for representation recognition, but translanguaging goes beyond recognition to the cognitive level of meaning making. One of the great differences in translanguaging approaches between the Global South and the Global North is that the latter has taken up translanguaging for recognition of different cultures while leading students towards the dominant language (English, German, etc.). And in the Global South, translanguaging goes beyond that to meaning making and cognition; as such, it is a pedagogic strategy (Heugh, 2015).

Based on the student interviews, an English-only environment seems to be detrimental to students' confidence; they are not sure what they know and what they do not know, second-guessing themselves because of the language barrier. This is something English-speaking students do not have to deal with, as Paxton's interviewee (2007) reported: "it's easy to learn in your language because with English, you first have to learn the language."

That is why Batibo (2010) argues that the use of the first language has the benefit of making the school environment a familiar place because the language used in both environments is the same, it is inviting, and that gives confidence. This point is important when linked with the views of the lecturer who was also the convenor. He argued that it would be good to use African languages because in biology there are interesting terms and phrases that relate an animal to what it eats, for instance. This was interesting because it is true; a giraffe, for instance, in isiXhosa is "indlulamthi," which roughly means the passer of a tree. This is because a giraffe has a very long neck and eats from tall trees, as such it is taller than trees or surpasses trees with its long neck. This is a good example of that common sense place and that connection between animals and the world around them, which shows that there is nothing to lose; in fact, there is more understanding to be gained by incorporating African languages.

One of the reasons often put forward for why African languages cannot be used for teaching and learning is the view of multilingualism as a problem. The African continent is very multilingual, leading to the argument that using any one language will disadvantage those who do not speak the language being used. South Africa had a unique experience in which many of its nine provinces have a dominant African language. This is why the Ministerial report on African languages as mediums of instruction (2003) recommended that each institution must adopt one language that it can develop for future use as a medium of instruction (South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training, 2003, 2015).

There was a concern from some of the demonstrators about the use of one language over the others. Still, it needs to be understood that isiXhosa at RU has special privileges as the language to be developed for future use as a medium of instruction. Additionally, if this fear is always present, this means that no African language will ever develop to be a language of high function. The number of respondents also indicated that a larger proportion were isiXhosa mother tongue speakers. This indicates potential for the proposed voluntary isiXhosa ADP class suggested by one of the respondents. Due to the mutual intelligibility of

14

the Nguni languages (isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiSwati, isiNdebele), an ADP class can be organized in a translingual manner to accommodate more than just isiXhosa. Such a class would offer the kind of support that is familiar to those students who have always had a teacher who taught using both their mother tongue and English.

The final point to discuss is the question of disadvantage through the use of African languages to teach. Indeed, English is a very dominant language in high-function spaces, but Alexander (2000) argues that English is unassailable, but also unattainable. Arguing that students need more English because it is the dominant language does not address the fact that they do not have the very specific conditions (good teachers, good schools, etc.) to ensure that they receive good English tuition. The argument that students who have an English "deficit" need more English is not a new one.

Cummins and Swain (1986) dealt with this by demonstrating that exposure to more English does not lead to enhanced English proficiency. What is needed is Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE), which would ensure that students receive an education that is in a familiar language and have access to English competency as well. It is interesting, though, that the argument that speaking or developing African languages will be a disadvantage is never used for Afrikaans. The Afrikaans language is only spoken in South Africa, just like isiXhosa is, but Afrikaans never meant Afrikaners are less scientists or are disadvantaged scientists. What is needed is a balance between local and international needs, and these two things can be balanced through translanguaging and an education policy that ensures that the mother tongue also plays a prominent role alongside English.

Conclusion

This research has established that there is support for more use of African languages in teaching and learning situations from students who speak the languages. This support is influenced by the struggles the same students go through with understanding the English language through which the content is delivered and the alienating environment in HE. Most of these African language-speaking students come from backgrounds in which they had the aid of teachers who used a translingual pedagogy in which English and their mother tongue were used side by side.

This study also found that there are differing opinions among the lecturing staff, with one supporting an increased use of African languages in the early years, another believing that the use of other languages will be a disadvantage for students in the long run, and the third lecturer preferring a code-switching model that still focuses on English.

Demonstrators were also of differing opinions, with some believing in the use of African languages to support students without reservations, particularly those who were speakers of African languages themselves. On the other hand, some demonstrators believed that there can be some use of African languages, but this must be a measure leading towards more English tuition, as English is an international language. All these views demonstrate that there is a divide in opinions between those who teach and those that are taught.

References

Alexander, N. (2000). English unassailable but unattainable. The dilemma of language policy in education in South Africa. *PRAESA Occasional Papers* No. 3. PRAESA.

Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the nation: The language question in Sub Saharan Africa*. Edinburg Press.

Bangeni, B. Kapp, R. (2008). Shifting language attitudes in a linguistically diverse earning environment in South Africa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 28*(4), 253–269. https://doi.org/10.2167/jmmd495.0

Batibo, H. M. (2010). The use of African languages for effective education at tertiary level. In P. Maseko (Ed.), *Terminology development for the intellectualisation of*

African languages. PRAESA Occasional Papers. No. 38. PRAESA.

Bunting, I. (2004). The higher education landscape under apartheid. In N. Cloete, P. Maassen, R. Fehnel, T. Moja, H. Perold, & T. Gibbon (Eds.), *Transformation in higher education: Global pressures and local realities in South Africa* (2nd revised ed.; pp. 35–52). Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Cohen, L., Morrison, K., & Manion, L. (2011). *Research methods in education.* Routledge.

Cummins, J. (1980). The cross-lingual dimensions of language proficiency: Implications for bilingual education and the optimal age issue. *TESOL Quarterly, 14*(2), 175–187. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586312

Cummins, J. (2009). Fundamental psycholinguistic and sociological principles underlying educational success for linguistic minority students. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R., Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty & M. Panda (Eds.), *Social justice through multilingual education* (pp. 19–35). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691910-005

Cummins, J. & Swain, M. (1986). *Bilingualism in education: aspects of theory research and practice.* Longman.

Davis, J. (1996). The State and the South African University system under Apartheid. *Comparative Education, 32*(3), 319–332 https://doi.org/10.1080/03050069628740

Dogamo Doda, A., & Narayana T. (2015). The benefits and challenges of mother tongue based education. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research, 2*(5), e4.

Fafunwa, A. B. (1990). Using national languages in education. A challenge to African educators. In UNESCO UNICEF (Eds.), *African thoughts on the prospects for education for all* (pp. 97-110). UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Africa.

Gambushe, W., Nkomo, D., & Maseko, P. (2017). Using African languages to teach science in higher education. In R. Kaschula, E. Wolff, & P. Maseko (Eds.), *Multilingualism and intercultural communication: A South Africa perspective.* Wits University Press.

García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). Language, bilingualism and education. *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137385765_4

Heugh, K. (2015). Epistemologies in multilingual education: translanguaging and genre-companions in

conversation with policy and practice. *Language and Education, 29*(3), 280–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994529

Hurst, E., & Mona, M. (2017). Translanguaging as socially just pedagogy. *Education as Change, 21*(2), 126–148. https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2017/2015

Kioko, A. N., Ndung' u, R. W., Njoroge, M. C., & Mutiga, J. (2014). Mother tongue and education in Africa: Publicising the reality. *Multilingual Education, 4*(18), https://doi.org/10.1186/s13616-014-0018-x

Llorah, R. (2006). The dilemma of the HBU's. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 20*(3), 79–96. https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v20i3.25587

Madiba, M. (2010). Towards a model of terminology modernisation in the African languages of South Africa. *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa, 32*(1), 53–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/10228190108566172

Madiba, M. (2011). Fast-tracking concept learning to English as an additional language (EAL) students through corpus-based multilingual glossaries. *Alternation, 17*(1), 225–248.

Makalela, L. (2015). Translanguaging as a vehicle for epistemic access: Case for reading comprehension and multilingual interactions. *Per Linguam, 31*(1), 15–29 https://doi.org/10.5785/31-1-628

Makoni, S. & Pennycook, A. (2007). *Disinventing and reconstituting languages.* Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599255

Mamdani, M. (2017). *Africa and the changing world.* Lecture delivered at the 8th annual Thabo Mbeki lecture. UNISA.

Manik, S. (2015). Calibrating the barometer: Student access and success in South African public higher education institutions. *Alternation,* (17), 226–244.

Mesthrie, R. (2008). Necessary versus sufficient conditions for using new languages in South African higher education: A linguistic appraisal. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 29*(4), 325–340. https://doi.org/10.2167/jmmd570.0

Muraina, L., Toshe-Mlambo, Y., & Cingo, S. (2024). South African higher education: Transformation or/ and decolonisation? *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South, 8*(1), 183–205. https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v8i1.321

Obanya, P. (2004). Learning in, with and from the first language. *PRAESA Occasional Papers, 19.* PRAESA.

Okedara, J. T., & Keara, C. A. (1992). Mother tongue literacy in Nigeria. *Annals of the American Academy of*

Political and Social Science, (520), 91. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716292520001011

Paxton, M. (2007). "You would be a master of a subject if taught in Xhosa…": An investigation into the complexities of bilingual concept development in an English medium University in South Africa. *The International Journal of Learning, 14*(6), 61–67. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v14i06/45374

Paxton, M. (2009). It's easy to learn with your home language, but with English you have to learn language before you get to the concept: bilingual concept development in an English medium university in South Africa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 30*(4), 345–359. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630902780731

Rhodes University. (2019). *Language policy.* Rhodes University.

Ridge, S. G. M. (2001). Is Afrikaans a suitable model in planning the development of African languages? *Per Linguam, 17*(1), 24–35. https://doi.org/10.5785/17-1-133

Schleef, E. (2014). Written questionnaires in sociolinguistics. In J. Holmes & K. Hazen (Eds.), *Methods in sociolinguistics.* Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394260867.ch3

Seidman, I. 1998. *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences.* Teachers College Press.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. & Toukomaa, P. (1976). *Teaching migrant children's mother tongue and learning the language of the host country in the context of the sociocultural situation of the migrant family. A report prepared for UNESCO.* University of Tampere.

South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2002). *Language policy for higher education.* Government Printers.

South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2003). *The development of Indigenous African languages as medium of instruction in higher education.* Government Printers.

South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2015). *Report on the use of African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education.* Government Printers.

South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2020). *Language policy framework for public higher education institutions.* Government Printers.

South African Council on Higher Education (2007). *Higher Education Monitor No. 6: A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education.* Council on Higher Education.

South African Council on Higher Education. (2010). *Higher education monitor No. 9: Access and throughput in South African higher education: Three case studies.* Council on Higher Education.

South African Council on Higher Education (2020). *Vital stats: Public and private higher education data 2021.* Council on Higher Education.

South African Government. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* [pdf]. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf

Statistics South Africa. (2022). *National census.* Government Printer.

Thomas, G. (2011). *How to do your case study: a guide for students and researchers.* Sage.

UNESCO (2010). *Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education: An evidence and practice based policy advocacy brief.* UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

Yin, R. K. (1993). *The application of case study research.* Sage.