



African languages in teaching and learning: Implementing and promoting multilingualism and decolonisation in South African higher education

Berrington Ntombela¹, Suresh Canagarajah² & Nomalungelo Ngubane³

¹*Department of Languages, University of Limpopo, Republic of South Africa*

²*Department of English, Pennsylvania State University, United States of America*

³*Academy for Multilingualism, University of the Free State, Republic of South Africa*

The call for this Special Issue can be thematised into African languages in teaching and learning, multilingualism, and decolonisation. These themes come from the (South) African language realities where teaching and learning are through European languages that are not spoken by the majority of learners and teachers or students and their lecturers. The languages that were brought by colonialism continue to be used for teaching and learning long after the process of colonialism. There has been a continued call to alleviate the plight of many Africans who cannot access knowledge adequately because of language barrier.

As part of correcting the neglect of African languages in teaching and learning, the 1996 Constitution of South Africa promoted multilingualism as the underpinning principle. The notion of multilingualism sought to represent the South African linguistic reality which had earlier been used by the apartheid system to segregate citizens. As a result, homelands were created where, for instance, speakers of Setswana were confined into Bophuthatswana homeland; speakers of Tshivenda in Venda homeland; speakers of Xitsonga in Gazankulu; speakers of Northern Sotho in Lebowa; speakers of Sesotho in Qwaqwa; speakers of isiXhosa in Transkei and Ciskei; speakers of siSwati in KaNgwane; speakers of isiNdebele KwaNdebele, and speakers of isiZulu KwaZulu. This arrangement was only meant to divide and rule. The prime landscape which was reserved for the Republic of South Africa belonged to the Whites. In addition to the linguistic demarcations, people, especially in urban areas, were racially segregated. However, education was carried out in the medium of

English and Afrikaans, needless to say that the education system also discriminated along racial lines to the extent that Africans received their specialised Bantu education meant to teach them that equality with Whites is not for them. Therefore, when the apartheid system collapsed, the homeland system and racial segregation also collapsed which brought all these languages and races into one South African rainbow nation. With this reality that English and Afrikaans as media of instruction only accommodated a fraction of the population, resulting in the poor level of education for the majority, mainly on account of a language barrier, the democratic government recognised African languages that were marginalised by elevating them into official status. This means that South Africa ended up with nine more official languages in addition to English and Afrikaans. The South African Sign Language was added in 2023 as the twelfth official language. The 1996 Constitution states that these languages must be treated equitably and enjoy parity of esteem. For the benefit of the majority, there is an urgent need to utilise African languages as media of instruction.

The impetus to expedite the utility of African languages as media of instruction is further driven by the imperatives of decolonisation. The linguistic dominance of English across Anglophone colonies is a result of a colonial agenda. It was expected that when colonies obtained their independence, a reversal of the colonial onslaught would occur; however, things seem to have remained as the process of colonialism metamorphosed into neo-colonialism. In other words, the continued reliance on English (and European languages in general) perpetuates the mental suffering of the majority who cannot

access knowledge in their own languages. Therefore, a decolonial project forms a vehicle that must see the realisation of the utility of African languages in teaching and learning.

It is these realities that gave birth to this collection. Many authors responded to the call, which resulted in seventeen articles being accepted for publication. Strict protocols of double-blind review were followed with all papers in order to maintain the journal's national and international repute and excellent standards. The broad themes covered in the articles include codeswitching, dictionaries in African languages, decolonising education, indigenous languages in teaching and learning, translanguaging, translation of academic texts, linguistic imperialism, academic writing in African languages, intellectualisation of African languages, multilingualism, decolonising business writing, linguistic revolution, and bilingual language policy.

In "A resource or a threat? Codeswitching in the English First Additional Language classroom" Zondi and Mncube, drawing from codeswitching practices in KwaZulu-Natal, present the inevitable switch between English and isiZulu in schools. Their study is motivated by the fact that despite negative connotations of codeswitching, its prevalence has pedagogical reasons that must be acknowledged in policy. Dladla in "An etymologically based lexicographic approach for developing encyclopaedic pedagogical dictionaries in African languages" argues for the adoption of etymology-based bilingual dictionaries using isiZulu-English dictionary as a case in point. Modiba and Emsley's argument in "Decolonising education in institutions of higher learning: A review of literature" is based on multilingualism as means to decolonise education in higher education institutions in South Africa.

In "South African indigenous languages in teaching and learning: Policies and the threat of cultural genocide", Beckmann demonstrates how the dominance of English as the language of learning and teaching threatens South African indigenous languages and unleash cultural genocide. Ralushai, Ntombela and Rammala in "English First Additional Language teachers'

perceptions of translanguaging pedagogy: A case of Vhembe District, Limpopo Province" report the contestations of the utility of translanguaging in the context of teaching English First Additional Language. In "Students' utilization of their indigenous languages as resources that bolster dialogical participation during their learning", Zulu and Gumede draw from ubuntu to illustrate how the inclusion of South African indigenous languages in the education space diffuses the colonial dominance of English as the sole medium of instruction.

Mpanza and Dladla in "Issues to ponder on as we navigate the translation of academic texts from English into isiZulu" draw from their experience of translating academic texts from English to isiZulu in order to make suggestions on how to improve this process. In "Towards Breaking Linguistic Imperialism in Teaching and Learning in South African Universities: A Decolonial Perspective", Munyaradzi draws from linguistic imperialism to tease the hegemony of the English language in South African education in the context of the provisions of the Constitution to promote and develop African languages as languages of teaching, learning and research. In "Ambivalence among second-year students at a South African university about writing academically in an African language", Ndebele interrogates the ambivalence of choosing between the literacy English tradition and the African language literacy tradition in academic writing.

Madiba, in "Translanguaging as a decolonial pedagogic strategy for South African universities" advocates for translanguaging as a decolonial transformative pedagogy for attaining multilingual competence. In "Intellectualisation of Indigenous Language Sesotho at a South African University and Implications for the Speakers", Ngubane argues for the intellectualisation of African languages as means of breaking away from English monolingualism. Kluyts, De Klerk, Dlamini and Padayachee, in "Student Perceptions of Multilingual Learning and Teaching in Two Faculties at a South African University", motivated by their institution's implementation of the language policy, report the perceptions of students about the multilingual approach in university education. Emsley and Modiba in

“Multilingualism in South African universities is a fallacy: A Critical Realist Perspective” draw from a critical realist perspective to illustrate the disconnect between language, multilingualism, and decolonisation that impede epistemological access.

In “Thinking in my home language and writing in a second language: Towards decolonizing business writing”, Nyangiwe and Sibisi demonstrate the transference of politeness strategies from isiZulu in English business writing, which, they argue, need not be negatively conceived. Ntombela, in “The hegemony of the English language and the plight of African languages: Towards linguistic revolution”

proposes a move away from theories of resistance in favour of revolution a means to counter the hegemony of the English language. Busane in “The summarisation of the Introduction to Linguistics (ZULL1514) module of the University of the Free State (UFS) for better understanding: a contribution to students’ learning” draws from text simplification theory to unpack the nuances of morphological, orthographic and semantic structure of isiZulu. In “Tutors’ Experiences of Implementing a Bilingual Language Policy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal” Nsele reports on the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the bilingual tutorial programme in the University of KwaZulu-Natal.