



An Analysis of Staff Perceptions on Translanguaging in Teaching and Learning at One South African University

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ABSTRACT

Translanguaging is increasingly recognized as an essential strategy to improve epistemic access in multilingual societies, including many developing societies. This view is especially spurred by scholarly results that have confirmed that all languages are essential resources for learning beyond the language of teaching and learning. Therefore, this study focused on the perceptions of academics at a South African University on translanguaging, as they are crucial in successfully implementing these strategies to improve learning. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, using semi-structured questionnaires to gather academic data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data, while the qualitative data was analysed thematically. The results show that most staff had positive perceptions of translanguaging and conceded that it positively affected student learning. However, a few noted that using other languages was an impediment since students do not understand all languages. The study recommends that universities provide academics with language learning opportunities, ensure that academics understand the official university language policies, and provide training on translanguaging to ensure that academics know translanguaging strategies that can be adopted in university learning spaces.

KEYWORDS

Translanguaging; perceptions; social justice and multilingualism.

INTRODUCTION

Translanguaging is now recognised as a tool that can contribute to language parity in society generally and in learning contexts. This is particularly important in multi-lingual societies where English and other colonial languages are still dominant to the detriment of local languages. It is only as recent as the 1990s that language emerged in educational debates as one of the key arenas that perpetuated racist and colonial ideologies in developing societies. This has meant that calls for revisiting language policies in all sectors of society, including education have become louder. After the 1994 elections in South Africa, though language parity was considered a priority, policy implementation remained constrained to the extent that English and Afrikaans hegemony remained intact. This also means that these languages have led to deepened linguistic hierarchies, especially when they were made into languages of instruction, with scholars like Makoni and Makoni (2010) stating that they are language killers.

This is despite several constitutional and policy provisions that have designated the country and institutions such as education and business as multilingual. It is only recently that translanguaging has become a focal practice, especially in education, where it is acknowledged that translanguaging pedagogies can be tools that promote social justice. From a social justice perspective, translanguaging can be viewed as a tool to address historical inequalities and promote linguistic diversity to redress past injustices (Uzunboylu, 2018). Several studies by scholars such as Chaka (2020), Erdin and Sali, (2020); Ngcobo et al. (2016) and Mbirimi-Hungwe (2016) recognise the positive contributions of translanguaging to epistemic access especially learning areas such as languages, mathematics and sciences.

The Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE) in South Africa encourages the use of multiple languages in teaching and learning, including multilingual glossaries, translations, and mixed-language instruction (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). The LPHE is a response to an observation of the continuous marginalisation of African languages and growing recognition that the existing Language in Education Policy remains mostly monoglossic and is preventing the full participation of students in teaching and learning. Given the importance of perceptions in ensuring the success of translanguaging, this paper looks at how lecturers perceive translanguaging since, as important role players, they need to have a positive perception of translanguaging is to be normalised and accepted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A close look at the different literature sources reveals that although different scholars tend to define translanguaging differently, these definitions revolve around the notion that translanguaging refers to the intentional use of more than one language in a classroom to promote learning (Yafele & Motlhaka, 2021; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2020; Seals, 2021). Tsou & Baker (2011) provides a succinct definition, asserting that translanguaging entails employing two or more languages in classroom instruction with a deliberate intention to enhance knowledge sharing. Translanguaging's aim in this instance would be to assist learners in constructing

meaning, acquiring understanding, and attaining knowledge of content areas.

Translanguaging represents a radical shift from the traditional monolingual approach to teaching, where only one language is used in teaching and learning, to a bi/multilingual approach, where the different languages present in the classroom can be utilised to promote learning (García & Kleifgen, 2019; Seals, 2021; Yafele & Motlhaka, 2021). Stroud and Kerfoot (2020) further observe that the traditional monolingual approach to education is meant to silence other forms of knowing. Their view resonates with Fricker (2007:209) assertion that “epistemic justice requires a form of life that is informed by the social experiences of everyone, and to ensure that everyone is freed from the narrow interpretative practices of a privileged minority”. Similarly, Mbirimi-Hungwe and Hungwe (2016), Yafele & Motlhaka (2021) as well as Watson & Shapiro (2018) lament that monolingual education is a form of ideological violence against the speakers of minority languages. This has been confirmed by several scholars in all regions (cf. Alhahaj & Alwadai, 2022; Bolton, Bacon-Shone, Botha-Zhou and Mann, 2021, Chaka-Chaka, 2023; Csillik and Golubeva, 2020, Kossakoska-Pisarek et al. 2022; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023; Soler et al 2016 & Tsou and Baker, 2021).

Within this caveat, the proponents of the translanguaging view in South Africa challenge the dominance of English as a language of teaching and learning and advocate for an equitable use of all the languages available in a classroom, to promote learning. In the South African context, monolingualism is a considerable hindrance to epistemic access as it negatively influences the ability of South African students to access and engage with knowledge (Hungwe, 2019; Kumalo, 2020). Scholars such as Maluleke et al. (2020) maintain that translanguaging provides an opportunity to dismantle the epistemic violence and hegemony of Eurocentrism by centering African knowledge and experiences.

Given that translanguaging instead of multilingualism is emerging as a practical approach to ensuring epistemic access to knowledge, this study explores how lecturers perceive this practice and primarily focuses on a rural-based university where language has been reported to hinder student success. Neville (2004), one of the key proponents of language parity in South Africa, maintains that language mediates knowledge. Hence, the idea that language is a critical element in student success is now a generally accepted view since translanguaging has been shown to authenticate students’ social identities and create an emotionally safe environment for learning, thereby enhancing their positive schooling experiences, which facilitates epistemic access in many other parts of the world (Alhaj & Alwedai, 2022; Cummins, 2017; Domilescu & Lungoci, 2019; García, 2014; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2019; Khumalo & Mchombo, 2018; Zhou & Manns, 2021; Zorba, 2023). As a result, regarding the issue of language rights in the education sector in the South African context, various legislative frameworks support the implementation of translanguaging. As an illustration, Section 29(1)(b) of the South African constitution emphasises the right to education in the language of one’s choice, where feasible (RSA, 2005). In addition, the Language-in-Education Policy for South Africa addresses the historical and multilingual situation in South Africa, emphasising the need to implement language policies that

accommodate learners' multilingual capabilities (Makalela, 2017). The recently promulgated, Language Policy for Higher Education (insert year) provides various provisions aimed at promoting language learning and teaching in the higher education sector.

Perceptions and attitudes of academics on translanguaging

Much research has been conducted on the perceptions of students on translanguaging, (cf. Bacon-Shone & Botha, 2022; Pusey, 2022; Yusri, Huzaimi & Sulaiman, 2022). However, not much has been written about lecturers' perceptions of the practice in higher education, even though the practice is growing in significance. However, many studies look at translanguaging perceptions of teachers at high and lower school levels. Domilescu & Lungoci (2019) investigated students' teachers' perceptions of European multilingualism. The findings revealed that future teachers recognised the importance of multilingualism in strengthening the European identity and fostering a sense of unity among diverse linguistic communities. They also noted favourable perceptions towards the acquisition of foreign languages, emphasizing the role of multilingualism in promoting cultural exchange and understanding within Europe. Similarly, Khan et al. (2022) conducted a study in Pakistan to explore English language teachers' perceptions of code-switching and code-mixing as scaffoldings in teaching L2 speaking skills in Pakistan. Conclusions drawn from the study indicate that educators found it easy to relay teaching and learning material through code-switching and code-mixing (Khan et al. 2022).

In Malaysia, where students possess a diverse linguistic background, Yusri, Huzaimi and Sulaiman (2022) conducted a significant study that explored the perceptions of translanguaging among Malaysian English second language teachers. The findings revealed a positive perception of translanguaging strategies within the pedagogical landscape. The study revealed that the teachers concurred that translanguaging fostered a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. In addition, their research highlighted the practical implementation of these strategies in classroom settings and the resulting advantages (Yusri et al. 2022).

In the South African context, translanguaging challenges ordinary discourses about language boundaries of some languages like English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Afrikaans, Sotho and others by maintaining that bilinguals have one language repertoire through which people can communicate strategically (García and Li, 2014; Makalela, 2017).

Paxton and Tyam (2010) conducted a study on code-switching, one form of translanguaging within formal and informal learning groups in a university setting, aiming to understand the role of primary or hybrid languages to epistemic access within English medium universities. The study revealed that code-switching was frequent, notably during informal group discussions, as it served diverse functions, facilitating clarity and comprehension and fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity among participants (Paxton & Tyam, 2010).

Chaka, (2023), Mbirimi-Hungwe, (2019) and Ngubane & Makua, (2021) have argued that in most cases, when academics see value in languages, they are more likely to have positive perceptions of local languages, be they official or autochthonous. Nkhwashu et al. (2015), in a study at the University of Limpopo in South Africa, observed that positive perceptions of

different languages emanated from the growing understanding of the equality of human beings, as promoted by the social justice theory. This theory highlights that not even language can make another person or his/her language inferior. Therefore, as maintained by García (2009a), positive perceptions will ultimately lead people to realize the power of languages, and hence, the ability to translanguage will be seen as socially and culturally advantageous.

Negative perceptions of translanguage in learning

Canestrino et al. (2022) maintain that in societies with many languages, translanguage may lead to dysfunctional groups social fragmentation and may negatively affect the ability of people to communicate effectively. Translanguage is further not perceived favourably by some academics as it is viewed as a pedagogy that is still undeveloped and has no systematic implementation (García & Kleifgen 2019; Liu et al., 2023). To some academics, western languages like English enable participation in a globalizing world, and therefore, they become tools for survival in the globalizing world. In learning contexts, Khumalo (2020) bemoans the undeveloped nature of African languages which then hinder the ability of these languages to be useful for intellectual development. There are fewer learning materials and resources in local languages to be used for learning, thus impacting the recognition and parity of these languages. These negative perceptions may be spurred by English language hegemonies (Alexander, 2009; Garda et al., 2014).

RESEARCH METHODS

The pragmatism paradigm, which has become dominant in the social sciences, was used in this research. Its importance is that it is always practical. Parvas et al. (2016) observes that there have been considerable positive and good reviews in the literature, which have spurred the use of this pragmatic paradigm in research. A pragmatic approach is suitable in that it prioritizes *what works* while giving less credence to philosophical assumptions (Brierley, 2017). This means that it can recognise the potency of other paradigms, such as the positivist or constructivist paradigms, in explaining phenomena, thus giving researchers the flexibility to use 'what works'. There is a tacit acknowledgement that reality is complicated, as it can both be objective and socially constructed. As pointed out by Simpson (2018), adopting this paradigm for this study then allows the researcher to take a middle position when looking at the philosophy that influences the study, the methods and the analytical tools selected during the research process. Thus, the mixed methods design was used in this study. The data was gathered through a semi-structured online tool sent to all 52 academic staff members who were part of the population. A total of 38 online questionnaires were returned. Of these there were 21 male lecturers while 17 were females. In terms of home language, 26 lecturers spoke IsiXhosa as home language, three indicated that IsiZulu was their home language while two spoke Sesotho as a home language. Another seven lecturers noted that they spoke other languages as their home languages. This represented a total return rate of just above 70%. To analyse this data, descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data, while thematic analyses were used

for studying qualitative data. A coding strategy was developed, and LR represented lecturer identities in line with their participation.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Lecturers' perceptions of Translanguaging

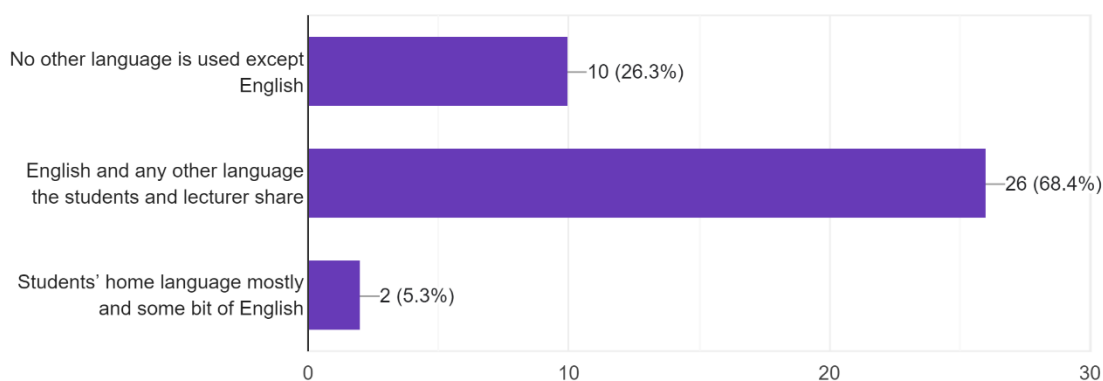
In terms of current use of translanguaging in the classroom, lecturers observed the following:

Figure 1.

Language use in the classroom

5. Which language options do you use during your classes?

38 responses



As per the figure 1 above, the majority of lecturers (68.4%) allowed the use of English and other local languages in the classroom. Another significant result was also that 26,3 % of participants allowed only English in their classroom. Lastly another 5.3% mostly used their home language and some bit of English.

Furthermore, excerpts reveal from a question regarding the lecturer's perceptions towards translanguaging reveal how lecturers felt about language use in the classroom:

LR3: *Students express themselves better or feel more comfortable in their home language.*

LR6: *It aids in better understanding and expression of concepts.*

LR30: *Encouraging participation and engagement by allowing students to use their preferred language.*

LR32: *Creating a relaxed and open classroom atmosphere.*

LR27: *Allowing academic freedom for better comprehension.*

LR21: *Enhancing confidence and freedom of expression.*

These verbatim accounts reveal that lecturers perceive that students show interest to learn in their home language as it leads to the development of understanding and independent learning environment. The use of home language provides students with a better opportunity to converse with others freely during teaching and learning. This means that most lecturers support translanguaging as a pedagogy that will cater to the principle of social justice in a bilingual university.

Lecturers' perceptions on promoting the use of multiple languages in the classroom

The lecturers indicated that they allowed students to express themselves in home languages for several reasons, such as that students feel more comfortable when learning in home languages.

LR14: *I encourage them to do so as this allows them to confidently express themselves.*

LR18: *Students are more comfortable in expressing themselves in their home language.*

LR26: *As way of encouraging participation, I allow students to express themselves in Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho. However, not all students are familiar with Sotho languages.*

LR32: *Students become free and comfortable to engage in the classroom using their language of choice.*

LR33: *Students are free to ask questions and engage during lecture using the language they understand easily, their home language, for them to understand the content. Then that discussion moved to English*

The data indicate that lecturers concur that use of several languages enables students to learn better as they can participate freely and understand content.

Lecturer's Perceptions of the Importance of Translanguaging

All lecturers acknowledged the importance of translanguaging and noted that the strategy aids comprehension, particularly in some concepts. The participants made the following statements:

LR8: *Not possible to use only one language due to the need to explain concepts in students' home languages.*

LR7: *Multiple languages are necessary to ensure comprehension, especially for complex terms or examples.*

LR27: *Some concepts are better understood or require translation into the students' native languages.*

LR3: *Students express themselves better or feel more comfortable in their home language.*

LR6: *It aids in better understanding and expression of concepts.*

LR30: *Encouraging participation and engagement by allowing students to use their preferred language.*

LR32: *Creating a relaxed and open classroom atmosphere.*

LR21: *Enhancing confidence and freedom of expression.*

The results reveal that staff acknowledges tacitly that translanguaging is essential as it allows students to learn complex concepts, creates a friendly learning classroom, and enables students to be part of the learning environment as they are free to express themselves.

Willingness of Staff to Translanguaging

The study revealed that 70% of the lecturers indicated a high willingness to use another language other than the language for teaching and learning, as shown in the ensuing responses.

LR1 said: *I am more than willing, very willing, extraordinarily willing and 100% willing.* Others went on to reveal the following:

LR28: *I am willing, as it makes learning exciting and interesting.*

LR26: *I'm willing to learn other languages to promote and enhance diversity.*

LR33: *Extremely willing to start with our Nguni languages.*

LR17: *I am willing to learn and at least acquire conversational proficiency in other languages.*

These data, therefore, show that lecturers are willing to use either their home language or translanguage during teaching and learning. This also reveals that lecturers have a positive attitude towards using a second language in teaching and learning. This can enhance translanguaging in bilingual contexts like the university where the study was conducted. As lecturers use translanguaging in these diverse contexts, it will promote social justice, as more students will not be left behind due to language proficiency obstacles. The study further revealed that 90% of the lecturers highlighted their openness and flexibility to use other languages for teaching and learning.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

From this study, students and staff showed positive attitudes toward using different languages as resources for learning within the university. The results showed an understanding of language as a tool for mediating knowledge; hence, many participants acknowledged the value of language in learning. These findings are like those by Alhaj and Alwedai (2022), Zhou and Manns (2021), Domilescu and Lungoci (2019) and Cummins (2017) in regions such as China, Asia and Europe. South Africa is a multilingual society, which means that for many, it is not uncommon to hear different languages spoken in communities and universities (Batool, Sharzard & Khan, 2022; Cummins, 2017). More often, language use in multilingual societies is regarded as a determinant of someone's identity, affiliation and culture. However, in some spaces, such as schools and universities, there is a persisting ideological bias that is driven by English hegemony and purism, which leads to many people viewing multilingualism in those spaces as unwanted (Donley, 2022; Mbirimi-Hungwe et al. 2020; Makalela, 2015). This hegemony goes against what Fraser (2003a), in social justice theory, terms "parity of participation", according to which social arrangements must "permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers. (Fraser, 2003a:36). When some languages are perceived as unwanted, it means there can be no parity of participation by the speakers of those despised languages. As pointed out by Madadzhe and Sepota (2007), indigenous languages are more often seen as useless and used by illiterate people who have a sense of inferiority and lack financial benefits. As social justice theory shows, what is essential is not the demand for recognition of a group's specific identity but the demand for recognition of people's standing as full partners in social interaction, who can participate as peers with others in social life (Dahl, Stoltz and Willig, 2003; Fraser, 2003) and this can best be achieved through language parity. If lecturers view language as a vehicle for mediating knowledge, it implies that they can make conscious efforts to challenge and transform entrenched systems and structures that perpetuate privilege and marginalisation. However, some of these perceptions by a few who expressed negative perceptions may be spurred by Anglo-Saxon ideologies and English language hegemonies (Alexander, 2009; Canagarajah, 2011; Garda and Li, 2014).

There is also another perspective which maintains that if languages are seen as valuable and enabling social justice, staff and students are likely to have positive attitudes of local languages (Chaka-Chaka, 2023; Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2019;). In this instance, translanguaging brings about learning benefits and, hence, positive attitudes among both students and staff, as was also reported by Nkhwashu et al. (2015) at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. Positive perspectives of different languages emanate from the growing understanding of the equality of human beings, as promoted by the social justice theory, that not even language can make another person or his/her language inferior. Theoretically, the perspective by Adler (1977) that detested bilingualism has been discredited as actually knowing more languages is now being seen as an advantage (García, 2009a). This means that as more people recognise the power of languages, they are more likely to have better and positive attitudes towards all peoples and their languages.

However, not all participants in this study have positive views on translanguaging. Some lecturers and students insist on using English, as they argue that it is a language that everyone understands, given the language diversity in the country and since universities still have expatriate lecturers who may not understand some local languages. As argued by Neeley and Dumas (2015), attitudes that view English as a better language lead those who can speak the language better to gain better status in class. Other scholars like Sliwa and Johanson (2019) point out that this status gain may arise from the accent used instead of the actual English proficiency. This study shows that most students who preferred English only came from schools in urban areas, confirming that English proficiency gives linguistic capital and, hence, mediates perceived performance in classrooms. This is not uncommon, as scholars like Mabila (2007) have noted that some parents in primary schools insist on their students' attending schools where English is the medium of instruction and vehemently oppose the introduction of local languages as legal languages of instruction. This points to the need for a holistic approach to increase awareness of the role of language in society. For many people, understanding that language equality is necessary for attaining social justice is critical. Therefore, language parity must be emphasised even at lower levels of schooling, not only in higher education. This shows that the problem starts not only in higher education.

The reasons cited by the participants who were opposed to translanguaging in this study were that because of classroom diversity, it is not possible to use an African language that all the learners will understand. At the university under study, some students who speak Xitsonga, Sepedi, Sotho, Afrikaans and other languages used in the northern provinces also could not speak IsiXhosa. Universities are becoming increasingly ethno-culturally and linguistically diverse because of students preferring to study away from their provinces. In addition, one foreign lecturer, who does not have communicative IsiXhosa, also indicated that using English in the classroom is essential to enhance access to knowledge. While there were fewer cases of this nature, the issue is that language diversity in institutions of higher learning is a huge concern (Canestrino, Magliocco and Li, 2022). The same authors note that where language differences

exist, organisations often encounter dysfunctional groups and social fragmentation, hindering people's rhetorical capabilities. As pointed out above, this causes misunderstandings and failure to share knowledge in learning organisations (Kazazoğlu & Ece, 2021; Makalela et al. 2007; Zorba, 2023; Welch & Welch, 2008).

We consider that these views that privilege English in the academy are discriminatory and not aligned with the social justice theory. Language recognition and parity are significant in learning environments have been seen to have several benefits as shown by several researchers in Asia (cf. Tsou & Baker, 2021; Bolton, Bacon-Shone, Botha-Zhou & Mann, 2021; Europe (Soler et al. 2016; Kossakoska-Pisarek et al. 2022), Africa (Chaka-Chaka, 2023; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2016) and in America (Csillik & Golubeva, 2020).

Several studies referred to in the literature review section show that universities need to provide tailored support to students and staff who do not have technical competency in the language dominant in the community where the institution is based. The approval of the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher education institutions in South Africa, which became effective in 2022, has put African language use in universities under focus. This new policy means that public universities now need to offer better language support services through short learning courses, language courses, academic writing support, and language tutoring support for students and staff, as Galante (2020a) suggested. Recognising languages that are spoken in communities where the university is located is crucial as it allows the university to acknowledge its location and enter better partnerships with different stakeholders, including students in those communities. In this study, two languages - IsiXhosa and English - dominated as media of instruction, and other languages are also used, especially IsiZulu and Sesotho, which many other people also speak in the community. Therefore, other languages must be recognised and nurtured to ensure language parity, which can be achieved if languages are intellectualised (Khumalo, 2020). It means that languages can achieve parity if they are intentionally and systematically used in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that lecturers generally have positive perceptions of translanguaging. They acknowledge that it contributes immensely to epistemic access by creating a friendly learning environment, better understanding of concepts, and acknowledging people as equals. The social justice drive helps ensure that all people are equal and must have their identities acknowledged and recognised, even in learning contexts. The parity of languages is vital to ensuring that identities are equal. This study, therefore, calls for the recognition of African languages to be used to enhance access.

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