Article

From Policy to Practice: Empowering African Languages in South African Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of African languages in South African higher education, highlighting the intersection of language policy, identity, and equity. Despite progressive language policies promoting multilingualism, English remains the dominant medium of instruction, creating barriers for both local and international students. Using Ruiz's (1984) Language Orientations Framework and Barkenbus's Four-Stage Policy Model, this study investigates the policy-practice gap in the implementation of African languages at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The findings reveal institutional, pedagogical, and ideological barriers hindering effective multilingual education. The paper argues that the marginalization of African languages contributes to epistemic injustice and proposes strategies to enhance linguistic inclusivity, including translanguaging pedagogies, policy enforcement mechanisms, and the development of African-language instructional resources. The study contributes to intersectional language studies by exploring how linguistic hierarchies shape access and identity in higher education for both local and international students.

INTRODUCTION

Language is central to knowledge production, academic success, and identity formation in higher education (Rahman et al, 2024). In multilingual societies like South Africa, language plays a pivotal role in shaping students' epistemic access which translates to the ability to engage meaningfully with academic content (Luckett & Hunma, 2014). However, higher education institutions in South Africa continue to privilege English as the primary language of

instruction, often to the exclusion of African languages and multilingual pedagogies (Heugh, 2015). This linguistic hierarchy not only reinforces historical inequalities but also marginalizes students whose primary linguistic repertoire differs from the dominant medium of instruction (Webb, 2010). The intersection of language, identity, and access thus becomes a critical site of analysis for equity and inclusion in higher education for both local and international students.

International students are typically defined as individuals who relocate to another host country for the purpose of pursuing tertiary or higher education, such as college or university studies (Shapiro, Farrelly, & Tomas, 2014). In contrast, local students are those who attend university in the same city or region where they completed their secondary schooling (Johnson & Wiese, 2022). The concept of student mobility refers to this cross-border movement of students for educational purposes, often driven by the desire to obtain academic qualifications, expand global perspectives, and enhance personal and professional development. Student mobility encompasses both short-term exchange programs and full degree enrollment and is shaped by a range of factors including national education policies, institutional partnerships, and broader global academic trends (Andersson & Wikan, 2015). Although local and international students engage with higher education from different starting points, language emerges as a critical factor that can either foster or hinder equity and inclusion within the university context. Given the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of both local and international students, it becomes essential to examine how multilingualism is addressed within the South African higher education landscape.

Multilingualism in South Africa is not simply a linguistic reality but also a constitutional imperative. The Constitution of South Africa (1996) recognizes 11 official languages and mandates the promotion of linguistic diversity (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In alignment with this, the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020) seeks to enhance the status of African languages in academia, emphasizing their use as languages of teaching, learning, and research (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). Yet, despite these policy efforts, the implementation of multilingual education models remains limited, raising critical questions about the gap between policy and practice (Chimbga & Meier, 2021).

This paper investigates the structural barriers and opportunities in implementing African languages in higher education, focusing on the University of Cape Town (UCT) as a case study. By exploring the policy-practice gap, this study examines how language policies can be leveraged to advance equity and inclusivity for both local and international students in South African universities.

To deepen the discussion, the following section investigates the linguistic landscape of South Africa as it manifests within the context of higher education.

South Africa's history of linguistic and educational inequality is deeply rooted in its colonial and apartheid past. English and Afrikaans were historically institutionalized as the dominant languages of education, while African languages were systematically marginalized (Alexander, 2003). The effects of this historical linguistic hierarchy persist, as English continues to dominate university

instruction, research, and assessment, reinforcing linguistic hegemony in academia (Bamgbose, 2011).

The exclusion of African languages in higher education has significant implications for linguistic justice, social mobility, and student success. Many South African students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, receive primary and secondary education in their home languages but are then required to transition abruptly to English at the university level (Webb, 2010).

This sudden linguistic shift often results in cognitive overload, academic disengagement, and high dropout rates among African language speakers (Heugh, 2015). Conversely, international students, many of whom arrive from multilingual African contexts, struggle to navigate a predominantly monolingual academic environment where linguistic diversity is not always accommodated (Piller, 2016).

While some universities have initiated multilingual support programs, including IsiXhosa courses in professional fields such as health sciences at the University of Cape Town, these efforts remain fragmented and inconsistent. The failure to institutionalize African languages as full-fledged languages of instruction and research underscores the persistent policy-practice divide (Chimbga & Meier, 2021).

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were proposed:

H_1:   The limited implementation of multilingual policies in South African higher education is significantly influenced by institutional resistance and resource constraints.

H_2:   The integration of African languages into teaching and learning positively impacts students' academic engagement and sense of belonging, particularly for local and international students from non-English backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

South Africa's multilingual context is deeply shaped by its colonial and apartheid past, during which English and Afrikaans were institutionally privileged, while African languages were relegated to the margins of public and educational life (Alexander, 2003). In the democratic era, this linguistic legacy has been formally addressed through the Constitution of South Africa (1996), which recognizes 11 official languages [now 12] and mandates the promotion of linguistic diversity (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

In higher education, this commitment is echoed in the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020), which calls for the development and use of African languages in teaching, learning, and research. However, research demonstrates that the implementation of multilingual policies in universities has

been largely symbolic, with English remaining the dominant medium of instruction and assessment (Webb, 2010; Heugh, 2015).

Scholars note that indigenous African languages continue to be perceived as insufficiently developed for academic discourse, limiting their inclusion in curriculum and institutional life (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017; Madiba, 2013). This situation perpetuates epistemic inequities and restricts access for students whose primary linguistic repertoires do not align with English dominance (Kamwangamalu, 2020). While language policy remains central to transforming higher education in South Africa, it must also be considered in relation to the increasing mobility of students and the linguistic challenges they encounter across institutional boundaries.

Student mobility, particularly the cross-border movement of learners for tertiary education, has grown significantly in the past two decades. According to the OECD (2025), over 4.6 million international students were enrolled in tertiary institutions across OECD countries in 2022, representing an 18% increase since 2018.

The concept of student mobility encompasses both full-degree study and short-term exchanges and is often linked to aspirations for academic achievement, global citizenship, and career advancement (Andersson & Wikan, 2015). However, international students frequently encounter barriers to inclusion, particularly in monolingual or English-dominant academic contexts (Piller, 2016).

In South Africa, international students from Francophone and Arabic-speaking African countries often experience linguistic and cultural exclusion, as do local students who enter higher education from African language backgrounds (Luckett & Hunma, 2014). The marginalisation of African languages in universities thus presents a dual challenge to both groups, reinforcing structural inequities and limiting opportunities for full academic participation (Heugh, 2015).

These linguistic challenges, experienced by both local and international students, draw attention to the disconnect between progressive language policies and their practical implementation within higher education institutions. Language Policy Implementation and the Policy-Practice Gap

Numerous scholars have emphasized the gap between progressive language policies and their actual implementation in South African universities. Although multilingualism is formally recognized at the policy level, in practice, English continues to dominate as the language of instruction and institutional communication (Tollefson, 2013).

The symbolic adoption of multilingualism often results in isolated pilot projects or superficial initiatives without adequate institutional support or resources (Chimbga & Meier, 2021). This disconnect has been linked to a lack of institutional will, limited funding, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation frameworks (Webb, 2010).

Studies suggest that the success of multilingual initiatives depends on aligning policy with clear implementation plans and the empowerment of language development units within universities (Madiba, 2013; Kamwangamalu, 2020).

In response to these implementation challenges, scholars have explored pedagogical strategies such as translanguaging to bridge the gap between language policy and classroom practice.

Translanguaging has gained prominence as a pedagogical approach that enables students to draw from their full linguistic repertoire in constructing academic knowledge (Garcia & Wei, 2014). In multilingual settings like South Africa, translanguaging allows for the inclusion of African languages in academic discourse, bridging the gap between students' home languages and the dominant language of instruction (Makalela, 2015).

Studies have shown that translanguaging enhances comprehension, promotes engagement, and affirms students' linguistic identities (Antony et al., 2024). Despite these benefits, its application in higher education remains limited and uneven, with uptake often depending on individual lecturers rather than institutional policy.

The need for formal training in multilingual pedagogies and institutional recognition of translanguaging is increasingly seen as essential for promoting equitable access to higher education (Wang, 2024). While translanguaging offers a practical entry point for linguistic inclusion, deeper questions remain about whose knowledge is valued in academic spaces, bringing the concept of epistemic justice to the forefront of language-in-education debates.

Heugh (2015) has contributed significantly to the discourse on multilingual education, particularly within the South African context. Their work underscores the value of translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies as tools for enhancing students' academic access. Heugh emphasizes the cognitive and pedagogical benefits of using African languages alongside English in university classrooms. However, while their work touches on inclusion, it does not explicitly engage with the concept of epistemic justice or interrogate how language policy contributes to broader questions of equity and decolonial knowledge production within higher education institutions.

Madiba (2013) offers a practical framework for developing multilingual academic literacy. Their research focuses on the institutional and pedagogical mechanisms needed to support African language development in academia. Though Madiba highlights the operational aspects of language support units and tutorials, their work does not fully explore how language intersects with students' epistemic agency or how language choice shapes whose knowledge is validated in the academy. As such, the deeper ideological and justice-oriented implications of multilingualism remain underexplored.

Antia's (2000) research delves into language policy and terminology development, with a strong emphasis on the intellectualisation of African languages in South Africa's higher education landscape. Their work provides crucial insight into the systemic undervaluing of African languages. However, Antia's focus remains largely on the technical and infrastructural aspects of language development, rather than the lived experiences of students or the broader issue of epistemic injustice.

There remains a gap in connecting his policy-oriented work to the affective and identity-based dimensions of language exclusion in academic spaces. While

Antia's scholarship sheds light on the structural dimensions of language development, it leaves open questions about how language intersects with power and knowledge production, questions that are taken up more explicitly in Patel's decolonial critique of academic epistemologies.

Patel (2016) offers a compelling critique of colonial knowledge systems in her work on decolonisation and education. Her scholarship addresses the marginalisation of non-Western epistemologies and calls for a restructuring of how knowledge is legitimised within academic institutions. While their contributions are foundational to the concept of epistemic justice, language is not a central concern in their analysis.

As such, their work provides an important theoretical base but does not explore the specific role of language in perpetuating or challenging epistemic exclusion. Building on Patel's call to reimagine dominant knowledge structures, Santos (2014) further advances the conversation through their theory of cognitive justice, offering a global South perspective on the coloniality of knowledge.

Santos (2014) introduces the notion of 'epistemologies of the South' and argues for cognitive justice by recognising diverse ways of knowing that have been suppressed under Western-centric paradigms. Their framework is instrumental in understanding the coloniality of knowledge in global academia.

However, similar to Patel, Santos does not explicitly address language as a key axis of epistemic justice. Their theoretical work opens the door to broader critiques but lacks a specific focus on language policy or multilingual practices in education.

Taken together, the works of scholars cited herein offer important insights into multilingualism, language development, and decolonial theory in higher education. However, they tend to focus either on pedagogical strategies, policy design, or broad epistemological critiques, without fully examining how language itself functions as a site of epistemic justice, particularly in shaping the lived academic experiences of both local and international students.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by positioning language as both a tool and a site of epistemic justice. By investigating how multilingual policy implementation (or its absence) shapes access, identity, and equity for both local and international students, the research builds upon these scholarly foundations. It offers an applied analysis of how language ideologies translate into institutional practice and affect students' engagement with knowledge.

The use of Ruiz's Language Orientations Framework and Barkenbus's Policy Model enables a critical examination of the interplay between policy, pedagogy, and epistemic inclusion.

To address these layered gaps, this study is grounded in two intersecting theoretical frameworks that provide a lens for critically examining how language is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced within higher education institutions

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, which focused on language policy implementation at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The qualitative design was selected to capture the complexity of multilingual policy practices within a single institutional context, allowing for a rich, context-sensitive analysis of both institutional structures and individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection

Data was collected through three key methods. First, a document analysis of national and institutional language policies was conducted to explore how multilingualism is framed in policy discourse and what commitments are outlined for implementation.

Second, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were held with a purposive sample of university stakeholders, including students (both local and international), academic staff, and policy implementers. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the lived realities of linguistic inclusion and exclusion, while the focus groups offered a platform for participants to reflect collectively on their experiences (Bazeley, 2013).

Third, non-participant classroom observations were conducted in selected courses across the Faculties of Education, Health Sciences, and Engineering. These observations focused on the use of language during instruction, student-teacher interactions, and the presence or absence of multilingual pedagogies.

The participant group consisted of a diverse range of individuals, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, lecturers, and institutional policymakers. Participants were selected purposively to reflect a range of language backgrounds, faculties, and nationalities, ensuring that both local and international student perspectives were represented (Patton, 2015).

Considering the human-centered nature of this research, careful attention was given to ensuring ethical integrity throughout the study.

RESULTS

This section presents the key results of the study, which illuminate the gap between language policy and actual practice at the University of Cape Town. While multilingualism is formally endorsed through national and institutional policies, English remains entrenched as the dominant medium of instruction. The data reveals that institutional resistance, resource constraints, and limited pedagogical support are significant factors hindering the integration of African languages in academic contexts. Furthermore, both local and international students experience exclusion in different ways due to the monolingual academic environment, highlighting how linguistic inequities are perpetuated despite policy intentions.

Furthermore, the results of this study are best understood through the lens of Ruiz's (1984) Language Orientations Framework, which offers three dominant ways of conceptualizing language in policy: language-as-a-problem, language-as-a-right, and language-as-a-resource.

Evidence from the institutional context reflects a prevailing orientation of language-as-a-problem, where indigenous African languages are often perceived as a barrier to academic success or operational efficiency. This perception contributes to the symbolic nature of multilingual commitments, where policies exist on paper but lack meaningful implementation.

In contrast, moments where translanguaging practices or multilingual support initiatives are introduced suggest an emerging, though limited, orientation toward language-as-a-resource. The absence of a rights-based discourse among institutional leaders further underscores the marginal position of African languages in the academic hierarchy.

By applying Ruiz's framework, the study reveals how dominant language ideologies shape both policy design and the institutional resistance to multilingual education.

Barkenbus's (1998) Four-Stage Policy Model which comprises of problem identification, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, provides a valuable framework for understanding the policy-practice gap evident in South African higher education. At the national level, the problem of linguistic inequity has been clearly identified and articulated through the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020). Policy formulation is also evident in institutional language strategies and mission statements that endorse multilingualism.

Figure 1: Themes Found in the Qualitative Analysis

However, the study's findings show that implementation remains fragmented and under-resourced, often limited to isolated pilot projects or symbolic gestures. Crucially, the final stage, which is highlighted as evaluation in the model, is almost entirely absent, with few mechanisms in place to monitor language policy impact or hold institutions accountable.

Applying Barkenbus's model helps illuminate why well-intentioned multilingual policies remain largely unfulfilled and points to the systemic interventions required to close the gap between policy and practice. These results point to the symbolic nature of current multilingual commitments and underscore the need for concrete, systemic interventions to advance linguistic inclusivity in higher education. A key barrier that emerged from the data is institutional resistance, which continues to undermine efforts to move from symbolic multilingualism to meaningful implementation. The data reveals that institutional inertia remains a major barrier to the implementation of multilingualism. Despite progressive language policy frameworks, there is a lack of strong leadership and institutional will to operationalize African languages as legitimate mediums of academic communication (Madiba, 2013; Kamwangamalu, 2020). Interviews with lecturers and administrators reflected concerns that implementing multilingualism is costly, logistically complex, and unnecessary given the widespread use of English. One administrator stated, "We have the policy, yes, but the infrastructure and planning needed to make it work are simply not there." This type of resistance often reflects entrenched colonial ideologies that continue to position English as the default language of intellectual legitimacy (Alexander, 2003).

Another prominent challenge identified in the study relates to resource constraints, which significantly limit the development and sustainability of multilingual initiatives across institutions.

A recurring theme across interviews and policy analysis was the lack of institutional resources to support meaningful multilingual education. Participants pointed to insufficient funding for developing African-language teaching materials, such as textbooks, glossaries, and digital resources. Language development units are often underfunded and understaffed, limiting their capacity to lead language transformation efforts (Heugh, 2015; Webb, 2010). Without targeted investment, African languages continue to be treated as peripheral rather than integral to curriculum delivery and scholarly discourse (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017). In addition to institutional and resource-related barriers, the study also highlights pedagogical limitations that hinder the effective integration of African languages into teaching and learning practices.

Findings from focus groups and classroom observations suggest that many lecturers lack the pedagogical training or confidence to integrate African languages into their teaching. Although isolated efforts exist such as using code-switching or bilingual support in tutorials, these practices remain inconsistent and are often driven by individual initiative rather than coordinated institutional policy (Madiba, 2013).

Students voiced a strong need for pedagogies that affirm their linguistic identities. As one student expressed, "We are forced to speak English to be

understood, but my real understanding comes when I think in IsiXhosa." The absence of formal professional development in multilingual teaching is a critical barrier to change (Makalela, 2015).

Beyond institutional and pedagogical challenges, participants also shed light on the lived experiences of students, revealing how linguistic exclusion manifests in everyday academic settings. Both local and international students reported experiencing exclusion within English-dominant academic spaces. Local students whose foundational education was in African languages expressed difficulty accessing complex academic material, resulting in lower confidence and engagement (Luckett & Hunma, 2014; Heugh, 2015).

International students who were particularly from Francophone and Arabic-speaking African countries, noted the contradiction between South Africa's multilingual national identity and the monolingual nature of university instruction. These perspectives reveal a mismatch between policy ideals and institutional culture (Piller, 2016; Andersson & Wikan, 2015). These student experiences further reflect a broader institutional pattern, pointing to the gap between symbolic gestures toward multilingualism and the substantive measures needed to realize genuine linguistic inclusion.

The data also highlights a disconnect between symbolic and substantive multilingualism. While language policies exist on paper, they often lack implementation strategies, timelines, or accountability mechanisms. As a language development practitioner noted, "There are beautiful documents, but no operational plan, no staffing, no budget." Multilingual initiatives are often limited to pilot projects or isolated departments, making it difficult to sustain or scale efforts across faculties. This results in a symbolic commitment to linguistic diversity that is rarely translated into practice (Chimbga & Meier, 2021; Tollefson, 2013). The results underscore the urgent need for a shift from performative to transformative language policy implementation.

This broader institutional gap brings into focus the differing yet interconnected ways in which both local and international students are affected, highlighting the need to examine linguistic equity from multiple student perspectives. Linguistic equity remains a critical concern in South African higher education, affecting local and international students in different yet intersecting ways. For many African language-speaking students, the dominance of English in curricula, assessment, and academic discourse presents a major barrier to full participation and success.

Despite policy commitments to multilingualism, English remains the de facto language of higher education, disadvantaging students who are not first-language English speakers (Madiba, 2013). Research indicates that these students often struggle to access and express complex academic ideas in English, which can negatively affect their academic performance, confidence, and engagement (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017). This linguistic hegemony not only undermines learning but also reinforces historical inequities by privileging those with higher levels of English proficiency while marginalizing those whose prior education was delivered primarily in African languages (Heugh, 2015).

International students similarly encounter linguistic barriers, particularly when arriving from countries where neither English nor South African languages are dominant. Despite South Africa's multilingual national identity, many universities operate primarily in English, creating challenges for international students to integrate academically and socially (Webb, 2010).

While some may have been drawn to South Africa for its celebrated linguistic and cultural diversity, many find the academic environment to be largely monolingual in practice. Students from Francophone and Arabic-speaking African countries, in particular, noted the lack of multilingual academic support structures and reported difficulty accessing course content, participating in discussions, and navigating administrative systems (Kamwangamalu, 2020). The absence of institutional mechanisms to support multilingual engagement for both local and international students highlight the systemic nature of linguistic exclusion in higher education.

These findings underscore the urgent need for structural transformation within South African higher education institutions. The following section outlines key implications and offers actionable recommendations to bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and the lived realities of multilingual academic practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the persistent disconnect between language policy and practice in South African higher education, revealing deep-rooted structural, ideological, and pedagogical challenges (Chimbga & Meier, 2021; Kamwangamalu, 2020). These challenges have significant implications for institutional transformation, student equity, and the broader goals of decolonizing knowledge production (Canagarajah, 2013; Luckett & Hunma, 2014). If South African universities are to realize the constitutional and educational commitments to multilingualism, they must shift from symbolic gestures to substantive action (Madiba, 2013; Webb, 2010).

Implications

The implications of the findings span several dimensions, including institutional leadership, resourcing, pedagogical practice, and student support. The discussion below outlines the core areas in which reform is required to move from symbolic to substantive multilingualism. To overcome institutional inertia, universities must demonstrate leadership and commitment to implementing multilingualism at all levels. This includes integrating multilingualism into strategic plans, allocating dedicated resources, and establishing language task teams to drive implementation. Institutional culture must also shift to recognize African languages as legitimate academic languages, not merely symbolic add-ons (Kamwangamalu, 2020; Chimbga & Meier, 2021).

Universities should allocate dedicated funding toward the development of African-language academic materials, including textbooks, digital platforms, glossaries, and journals. Institutional language units must be fully staffed and

supported to provide translation, terminology development, and multilingual content creation (Heugh, 2015; Webb, 2010).

Educator training programs should incorporate multilingual teaching strategies, including translanguaging and bilingual instruction. Academic development centers should offer regular workshops and mentorships to equip lecturers with practical tools for inclusive language practices. Recruitment policies should prioritize hiring staff with multilingual competencies (Madiba, 2013; Makalela, 2015; Alexander, 2003). Developing African-language teaching materials and equipping educators with multilingual teaching strategies are essential steps in achieving linguistic inclusivity. The lack of textbooks, academic journals, and digital resources in African languages has been a major obstacle to implementing multilingual education (Heugh, 2015).

Many lecturers also lack formal training in multilingual teaching methodologies, making it challenging to integrate African languages effectively into the curriculum (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017). Universities should invest in curriculum development, training programs, and research initiatives aimed at expanding African-language academic resources (Alexander, 2003). A 2024 study introduced a Learning Design based on Translanguaging and Multiliteracies Pedagogy (LDTMP), aiming to foster student agency and support educators in implementing multilingual approaches (Wang, 2024). This framework underscores the importance of resource development and teacher training in supporting translanguaging practices. Academic support structures must be expanded to include multilingual services. These may include bilingual tutoring, multilingual academic writing support, and glossaries of key academic terms in African languages. Language-inclusive mentorship and orientation programmes for both local and international students can enhance engagement and retention (Luckett & Hunma, 2014; Piller, 2016; Andersson & Wikan, 2015).

Translanguaging, a practice where students strategically use multiple languages to facilitate learning, has been recognized as an effective tool for promoting linguistic inclusivity in multilingual contexts (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Studies indicate that allowing students to write notes, discuss concepts, and express ideas in both English and their home languages enhances comprehension and academic engagement (Makalela, 2015; Antony et al., 2024).

Language policies must be operationalized through clear implementation plans, timeframes, and accountability mechanisms. Institutions should establish monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress and outcomes and publish annual language implementation reports. Faculty-level language champions can help translate policy into practice within disciplines (Tollefson, 2013; UCT, 2024).

Research shows that where faculties mandate the inclusion of African languages, whether it is through bilingual assessments, multilingual glossaries, or multilingual academic support, student performance and participation improve significantly (Kamwangamalu, 2020).

However, the success of these policies depends on sustained institutional commitment and resource allocation (Webb, 2010).

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