

WHOSE LANGUAGE IS IT ANYWAY? STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING AND ROLE OF ENGLISH FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MULTILINGUAL, SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

M. Joubert*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5814-4053>

B. Sibanda*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5189-6132>

*Centre for Teaching and Learning
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The current decolonial commitments in Higher Education necessitate a need to deepen our understanding of the relationship between English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and students' sense of belonging, their identity, and epistemological access. This article investigates how EMI influences students' personal and academic identities as well as their sense of belonging to the higher education space. Using student focus groups, this study is exploratory in nature and informed by the voices of undergraduate and postgraduate Humanities students at a South African university in the Free State. The responses were mixed, but there was general consensus that although English does have a place in higher education and can contribute to their sense of belonging, it also has an adverse effect on their identity; the use of indigenous languages provides them with greater epistemological access. A differentiated approach to multilingualism is a possible way forward.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, belonging, higher education, identity, epistemological access, multilingualism

INTRODUCTION

Multiple institutions of higher learning in Africa have adopted English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), the so-called “lingua academica” (Madiba 2012, 15). In South Africa, this is a well-established fact, even though English is a second, third or even fourth language for the majority of students in higher education. Indeed, recent data from the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) indicates that out of 14,174 undergraduate students at 10 South African higher education institutions, only 24 per cent cited English as their first language, and 17 per cent stated that they *only* use English for study purposes (Department of Higher

Education and Training 2021). The continued push for EMI is underpinned by the move towards greater internationalisation of higher education, economic concerns, positive social meaning in high-functioning public contexts, and the availability of resources and support. Milligan and Tikly (2016), for example, note that the predominance of English is linked in part to the colonial and postcolonial legacies that have favoured global languages over indigenous languages, as well as the view of English proficiency as a key indicator for economic development in the context of globalization (Crystal 2003; Casale and Posel 2011; Dearden 2014). This has, however, been accompanied by the intentional focus on multilingualism where indigenous languages are developed and, where possible, used as academic and scientific languages.

The medium of instruction in higher education, especially English as a colonial language and language of power, thus often generates fractures, contestations and ontological dilemmas. The fractures are more glaring when one considers Henderson and Lange's (2017) ideas of language as a humanising and animalising classifier. Where the languages of power are classified as humanising and used in the hierarchisation of human beings, the peripherised languages are classified as animalising. This hierarchisation of the languages is arguably one of the most ticklish subjects in higher education at the moment, and contributes to the existing ontological and moral dilemmas. According to Kumalo (2022), by having English as the *only* medium of instruction, contemporary South African Universities demonstrate a lack of criticality as EMI reinforces the colonial violence of excluding the dispensable *Other*, thus further alienating them from South African higher education institutions. This lack of criticality and the failure to recognize the expressivity and the visibility of the *Other* is constantly demonstrated by the normalised "disciplining effects when Blackness uses its mother tongue in the pedagogic space" (Kumalo 2022, 116). This contributes to why "higher education institutions tend to construct students' home identity and languages as a problem that has to be fixed through the provision of academic development courses" (Kapp and Bangeni 2011, 198). The university space thus has the potential to become an alienating environment where some students need to self-edit and leave their linguistic identity at the gate, only to be picked up again at the end of the day (Warda 2022).

Of course, this alienating effect can also impact upon students' learning, their epistemological access, and their sense of belonging to the institution. These issues were the concerns of this research project, which aimed to investigate whether English, as the primary medium of instruction at the University of the Free State, allows students to develop a sense of belonging to the institution and whether students, primarily second language speakers, claim any ownership of it. Indeed, the ownership and legitimacy of English in higher education

remains a highly debated and contested subject. This is because English in South Africa has a troubled history. The perceptions of English as a tool of exclusion, alienation and oppression, when combined with students' sense of (un)belonging within the higher education space, are what characterized the famous language debates of the 1960s (Sibanda 2021), and cultivated the soil for the 2015 South African student uprising, #FeesMustFall, which called on universities to decolonise language as part of decolonising institutions of higher learning (Boughey and McKenna 2021). This call created the ongoing dialogue about "How does English fit in with the decolonisation process?" (Constandius et al. 2018, 76) as well as what relationship second language students (i.e., the majority) have with the language?

Important to note at the outset, however, is that the call to decolonise the languages of instruction does not equate to banishing English, but rather to opening up dialogues with other languages. The #FeesMustFall protests have contributed to the ongoing changes in institutional language policies to accommodate multilingualism. They also contributed to language changes in former Afrikaans medium of institutions such as the University of the Free State, the University of Pretoria, and Stellenbosch University. Indeed, in 2016, the University of the Free State officially changed from being a dual medium institution to an English Medium of Instruction institution with the caveat that, "Multilingual study resources will be provided in the context of tutorials in order to support epistemological access for all students" (UFS 2016, 3).

In terms of identity, it became apparent at the beginning of this research project that the relationship between language and identity in higher education remains under-theorised (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, 3). However, a study conducted by Leibowitz et al. (2005) does provide a significant contribution towards the theorisation of language and identity outside the use of home language. The study, conducted in one institution of higher learning in South Africa, clearly established that there is a strong, but troubled relationship between identity, language, and the classroom. The key conclusions from this study evidence that language, in both proficiency and discourse, is an integral part of identity in higher learning. This is also in line with observations made by Bourdieu (1977) that language is a marker of identity, a source of identification and belonging in contexts like universities. To this end, Leibowitz et al. (2005, 34) observed that:

"... language plays a role as a resource and source of affiliation in the lives of lecturers and students. The relationship between identity and language intersects with teaching and learning in many spheres, including with an individual's sense of belonging and affiliation to an institution and with an individual's integration into the academic community of practice."

Based on such theorization, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced approach to the relationship between second language English speakers and English as a Medium of Instruction in higher education.

The term “belonging” has often been defined through the metaphor of feeling “at home” (Carolissen and Kiguwa 2018, 2). However, this has been criticised due to its perceived sentimentality and valorisation; indeed, not all homes are safe spaces (ibid). For this study then, the researchers use the term, belonging, in its literal sense; to belong means to form part of another, or to have an affinity for particular space (OED 2022). It is also important to note here that scholars warn against a binary view of university spaces as *either* welcoming *or* inhospitable since “... the experiences of ambivalence *and* discomfort about ‘home’ may themselves be useful experiences from which to construct opportunities for change” (Carolissen and Kiguwa 2018, 3 (original italics)). When discussing EMI, this non-binary and rather complex view of the higher education space as *both* welcoming *and* inhospitable, was immediately evident in the data of this research; the researchers thus wish to highlight the complexity of this topic from the outset.

Chinua Achebe holds that the ownership and legitimate use of English belongs to all who use it. He states that the African writer should use English

“... in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. [The writer] should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.”

Achebe (1965) and De Sousa Santos (2014) both agree that English second language users in the Global South are indeed the legitimate owners of this heirloom, like all the legitimate users in the world, “But it will have to be new English” (Achebe 1975, 62). However, in curating a table for “a plurality of narratives from silenced voices and invisible places” (Mbembe 2021, 79), English has a role to play as a world language if, in Chinua Achebe’s words, it submits itself to different kinds of use (Achebe 1965, 29). This ideal is demonstrated in its use as a world lingua franca, spearheading the current globalisation era.

With the above in mind, the researchers wanted to better understand students’ relationship with English as a Medium of Instruction and its effects on their learning endeavours. The researchers’ primary focus is on belonging and identity, since a “sense of belonging” has been identified as a key factor in high attrition rates (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 30). Other issues that arose from the data will also be discussed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is primarily exploratory in nature, but in order to tease apart the complexity of students' experiences of EMI in higher education as well as its link to students' sense of belonging and identity, the researchers have chosen to use Margaret Archer's Social Realist theory (1995, 1996, 2000) as its theoretical framework. The researchers would like to make clear at the outset that this is not an Archerian study; rather, its aim is to use SR in a "light touch" way as it is a useful language to talk about complex social realities. In other words, it is a tool for looking more closely at how social events and experiences emerge over time by considering the relationship between people and social structures. Essentially, SR has assisted the researchers in teasing apart the institutional structures and cultures that surround students and their use of EMI, to better understand what powers are at play and how they influence students, their sense of identity, and their sense of belonging. Archer has thus provided the researchers with a useful language to talk about the issue at hand.

In brief, structures are physical material resources and interests, which include, for example, social class, race, marriage, and education (Archer 1996). In this study, the primary structure that will be referred to is the policy of EMI at the University of the Free State. This is a structure because it is a principled and rule-bound course of action that the institution has undertaken; essentially it is a structure because it plays a role in distributing access to material goods (Boughey and McKenna 2021) and in shaping relationships between English first and second language speakers. Higher education is also a structure that will be examined in this article. Cultures, on the other hand, include anything that is "grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone", which includes beliefs, ideologies, theories, and values (Archer 1996, 104). The cultures identified in this study are the beliefs about the role of English in higher education, as well as the value that students do, or do not, attach to the indigenous languages of South Africa. Finally, agency is a person's (i.e., an agent's) ability to set goals and attempt to achieve those goals (Archer 1995). There are several examples of the participants' sense of agency, or rather lack thereof, from our data, but a useful example of students acting out their agency (their corporate agency) were the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements when students combined forces, and their voices, to ignite social change. In this study, we focus on students' agency which seems to play out in the ways in which students feel they have, or do not have, control over their own learning.

Important to note is the fact that social structures and cultures can have either an enabling or constraining effect on the actions of students. However, it is only by being able to distinguish between *enabling* social structures and cultures and *constraining* social structures and cultures, as well as *how* these structures and cultures affect their agency, that we can start to incite social

change. Thus, the usefulness of the SR lens for this research is that it has allowed us to uncover what cultural, structural and agential forces surround language *in* and *for* education.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this article was to investigate how EMI influences students' sense of belonging to and identity within the higher education space. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the researchers decided to embark on a qualitative methodology using student focus groups and interviews in order to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of the issue at hand. Indeed, a qualitative methodology allows researchers to access more "naturalistic" and "contextual" understandings of the problem (Patton 2002; Todd, Nerlich, and McKeown 2004). The use of such a methodology is thus fitting with the nature of this research project since its aim was to better understand students' contextual understandings and naturalistic experiences of EMI. It is important to note at the outset of this section that ethical clearance was given by the University of the Free State's ethical committee (clearance number UFS-HSD2022/0101/22). The participants were fully briefed about the aims and methodology of this research project and participation was voluntary with no incentive. All participants consented to the research.

Participants

The participants in this study were a mix of nine undergraduate and postgraduate Humanities students from the University of the Free State. Students came from both the Bloemfontein campus and the Qwaqwa campus and all students were second language speakers of English. Due to the time available for the research and the scope of the study itself, the researchers decided to limit the number of participants to the Humanities faculty. This decision was also taken due to our sampling technique, convenience sampling (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). The student participants who were invited to take part in the focus groups met the following criteria: easy accessibility, availability at a particular time, and willingness to participate (Etikan et al. 2016, 2).

DATA GATHERING

The data were gathered using focus groups, a form of group interview that generates data through its focus on communication between research participants (Kitzinger 1995; Bourne and Winstone 2021). This method of data gathering was specifically chosen because it allows for interaction between participants as they are encouraged to ask each other questions, share anecdotes, and comment on other participants' experiences and points-of-view (Kitzinger 1995). Student participants tend to feel more comfortable in focus groups as they may

experience a sense of “collective agreement”, making them more likely to offer in-depth responses to questions (Bourne and Winstone 2021, 353). This is a useful method for collecting qualitative data since it allows researchers to explore *what* participants think as well as *how* they think and *why* they think in the way they do (ibid). Unfortunately, not all the focus groups were well-attended, and one focus group became an interview as only one participant arrived at the designated time. The first and third focus groups were held face-to-face as this was preferable for student participation. Focus group two and interview one were held online in order to accommodate the student participants on the Qwaqwa campus (as the researchers were unable to travel to the campus for face-to-face focus groups).

Data analysis

Once the data was gathered, the researchers went about the process of coding and analyzing it. The researchers used an inductive approach to their coding of the data to allow pertinent themes to emerge (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007; Altheide et al. 2010). By using this inductive approach, the researchers wanted to let the students' voices speak the loudest rather than the theory. Once the key themes had been identified and named, the researchers chose only the three most representative themes due to limitations in space.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our focus groups and interviews provided us with pages of rich data, but in keeping with the theme of the special issue, we will focus our discussion on the following themes: 1) EMI and its link to identity and a sense of belonging; 2) multilingualism to promote belonging; and 3) EMI and its link to epistemological access.

EMI and identity

The first theme that became apparent is the relationship between identity, belonging, and EMI, which elicited varying responses from the participants. A prominent concern was how using EMI *at the expense of other languages* created an identity shift. This meant that the students had to assume one identity outside the classroom and another when they used English inside the classroom. EMI as an institutional structure then, has the potential to dislocate student identity. One participant stated that:

“When I am in class, I use English because we have to. It makes it easy to communicate and relate with others and the content being taught. We come from different linguistic communities, and if we had to use our home languages, then we would not understand each other. In the university's context, I have to assume a particular identity, and outside school, I assume another identity.”

This student clearly felt as though they have a lack of agency when in class because they “have to” use English. This student also highlights their two identities – one, which they assume while on campus, and another, which they assume off campus. One of the postgraduate students also spoke about their feelings of being an imposter when using English in the classroom:

“I get the feeling of the imposter syndrome [when using English in class]. One of the determining factors is that when you read these academic texts and articles and the English being used is totally different from undergraduate studies. You end up asking yourself, should I really be doing this course? Should I be doing postgraduate studies?”

Other participants even felt they needed to self-edit their identity when they adopt EMI and self-edit again when they go into their communities. One participant, for example, added that if you do not self-edit and use your home language in the classroom, you will be “ridiculed, laughed at and even shouted at by your lecturer”. Failure to self-edit when in social communities again leads to accusations of being arrogant, self-righteous and elitist, as observed by one student who stated that when using English in “our communities, you come across as if you trying to act better than everyone else”. Through these self-edits, the students’ identities are constantly contested and re-negotiated. The constant self-editing has become a state of being and a form of identity in itself. EMI as a structure seems to have a constraining effect on the enactment of student identity and this plays out in their needing to adopt different identities. It also seems that there are constraining cultures surrounding EMI. These are beliefs that English is inextricably linked to learning and teaching in the higher education. What this seems to allude to, and which will be shown momentarily, is the belief (i.e., culture) that students’ home languages are somehow inadequate for their learning needs.

There was also a common thread in the data that English is a useful tool for business, travel and intercultural communication. Additionally, the students felt that English is a vital resource for employment purposes as they stand a higher chance of gaining employment if they have mastered the language. This is in keeping with Bangeni and Kapp’s (2007) argument about English being a vertical code signifying upward mobility. The students’ contextualised, and sometimes partial embracing of EMI aligns with other prevalent views on English in post-colonial Africa and higher education. Achebe (1989), for example, finds the English language as a functional unifying grammar among Africa’s different language speakers. Contrary to the popular misreading of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, he also believes that “There is nothing wrong in wanting to take English or any other language as one’s own ... Each language, big or small, has its unique musicality” (qtd. in Malec 2017). Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) is also clear

on the value of embracing English as an unintended heirloom that can be used in the service of humankind.

Indeed, some of the student participants had similar views on the potential of English to be a unifying language and some have fully embraced English as part of their identity, and as a language that creates a sense of affiliation, belonging and sense of community in Higher Education. One participant noted that, “English is the language that brings all of us together. It helps to connect ... it is that one language that helps to remember that we have something in common”. Such views tie in with Sibanda’s (2022) observation that English plays a critical role in creating communities that understand each other in higher education conviviality; it therefore provides them with a common language to use in communicating with their fellow students. One student also commented that,

“[English] gives us a sense of belonging ... We would feel divided if there was a class for Sotho, a class for Zulu, a class for Afrikaans ... Whereas, when it comes to English, it takes a Sotho person, a Afrikaans person, a Sepedi, Xhosa, and puts us in one room and then we are the same.”

What these student participants highlight is the potential of English to create bridges between people who may not have been able to connect had they not had this language in common. This is in keeping with Achebe’s (1989) argument that English has a *unifying* grammar. The student participants thus clearly see the value of English as a tool that allows them to develop a sense of belonging to the institution, particularly when forming connections with other students and even staff. This understanding of EMI sees it as an enabling structure, which provides students with a sense of agency to create student communities as well as an overall sense of belonging.

However, such observations should not be accepted without any criticality as the findings from this study also indicate that such an embracing of EMI comes with limitations. Two excerpts from the study are relevant here:

“While I feel a sense of community, but when I am with native speakers of English, I feel like I do not belong [to the community]. I feel excluded.”

“I do not have a problem with English, but when I am in an academic and formal context, It becomes clear that this is not my language. When I am using it in the social context, it is fine ... English does not make me feel comfortable.”

The challenge then, as highlighted by these two contributions, is having English as the *sole* medium of instruction. This ties in with the participants’ views on the role of home languages and multilingualism in higher education; indeed, EMI as a hegemonic structure seems to interplay with the belief (i.e., a culture) that South Africa’s indigenous languages are not

appropriate for the teaching and learning space. There were some participants, for example, who felt that EMI imposes an identity, ownership, and legitimacy in higher education. As students, they merely conform to institutional precepts. One participant stated that:

“When we use EMI we lose a sense of who we are. We forget that what can be done using English can also be done using Sesotho, for example. By continuing to use English, we are continuing that stereotype regarding the importance of English and the hierarchy of languages. English is not that important. Because of this, I am using English to do what needs to be done so that I can get my degree.”

While another participant noted that:

“I am not a legitimate user of the English language. It is not my mother tongue. If you ask me about Sesotho, I would say I am a legitimate language user. With English, I am just a visitor ... I am following the trend of using English.”

Another two participants added that EMI either does not assist them in developing a sense of belonging or has the potential to make them feel inferior. The first student stated that, “EMI does not create a sense of belonging for me in higher education. I am using it to get by, using it as a tool”. While the second commented that,

“You get pressurized when you are around people who are actually English home language and your English isn't as perfect, so sometimes you feel like ... Ok, I don't know what to do now. I'm in this position, like, I'm not really as good as them, but I think at some point you do get that feeling that some people are inferior when it comes to English because there are people with a better understanding and can speak English better also.”

From the above, it is observed that some students feel like outsiders in higher education because of the *sole* use of EMI. The institution imposes this structure, EMI, on them; hence they *must* use it to achieve their academic goals. The detachment and sense of alienation unconsciously creates an identity shift, as discussed above. Students still need to assume a particular identity (that of visitors) when in class. According to Leibowitz et al. (2005, 27), such “lack of ownership of meaning” influences whether one takes on the ownership and identity that comes with language, while Walker (2005, 53) maintains that “the University is an important location for the ensuing identity work as a site where discourses collide, are distorted or articulate”. This lack of ownership of meaning can also be read as a lack of agency. Clearly, these participants see the use of English as misaligning with who they are and with their world views. As such, they need to create and shape multiple and dislocated identities.

Drawing from the student data, it seems that EMI is a structure that is both constraining

and enabling. It provides students with a sense of community, but this has its limitations. The student agency that plays out as differing levels of comfortability, identity shifts and self-editing, consciously and unconsciously, acts as a recurring reminder to students of the fragile and fluid nature of this (un)belonging. It is the constant need to self-edit that potentially leads to dislocated identities in the classroom.

EMI and multilingualism

The call to decolonise South African universities included the call to decolonise language and exclusionary languaging practices in pursuit of social and epistemic justice. In addressing the coloniality of language and the repressed expressivity of the *Other*, universities, as a remedy to the monovocality of English in higher education, had to focus on multilingualism to bring the students' languages back to the classroom to complement EMI and increase the students' sense of agency in their own learning. To do this, the UFS established the Academy for Multilingualism at the beginning of 2021, which "... aims to promote [local indigenous languages] on institutional and social levels through various academic and community-based projects and initiatives" (UFS 2022, n.p.). In other words, the institution has established a structure, the academy, with the aim of changing the beliefs (i.e., culture) surrounding the use of indigenous languages for teaching and learning purposes. Indeed, the focus and implementation of multilingualism in higher education speaks to students' sense of belonging and identity because language carries the values of one's identity. Wa Thiong'o (1985, 156) points out that language, as intimately linked to culture, is a carrier of people's values:

"... values are the basis of a people's self-definition – the basis of their consciousness. And when you destroy a people's language, you are destroying that very important aspect of their heritage ... you are destroying that which helps them define themselves ... that which embodies their collective memory."

Implementing multilingualism in the classroom, using translanguaging, translation and codeswitching, allows for different identities to dialogue and mutually benefit from each other. This would hopefully progress the shift in the cultural belief of English as elite, and of African languages as not having equal market value (Mayaba, Ralarala, and Angu 2018). However, as much research has shown, although structures can change, cultures are perhaps more difficult to shift. Indeed, although South African has a progressive language policy, it has had a "... tendency to promote indulgence in rhetoric and idealism" (Cele 2004, 39). As Cele (2004, 39) argues, the idealistic aims of policy do not always match the practical realities on the ground and the promise of granting "... various indigenous languages political freedom and economic

power has not yet addressed the frustrations of many black people". The aim, as Cele (2004, 47) points out, is not to take an "anti-English" stance since there are undeniable market and pragmatic realities to contend with; English can rather be used in a utilitarian way, as a tool to "... counter-penetrate the West with the intention of influencing and manipulating its thought and conception of Africa as a continent ...". The use of multilingualism in the higher education space is valuable if used from a differentiated approach depending on the needs of students (Cele 2004).

Some of the participants' responses seem to echo this argument; there is a clear need for a multilingual diffusion-of-English paradigm (Makalela and McCabe 2013) in teaching and learning and how this speaks to belonging. One of the participants pointed out that:

"Language is part of my identity; it is who I am. I consider myself a proper Sesotho-speaking woman. English is imposed on us. This does not make it ours. If it were up to me, I would have chosen to study in a language I am comfortable with. Yes, English forms part of my academic identity, but it is not the kind of person I am. There is this [student's name], and then there is the other [student's name], who, in a certain place, has to speak in a certain way."

The excerpt above underscores the importance of bringing other languages and identities into the classroom. The oft excluded African languages, according to the participants, *do* have the intellectual stamina to carry the rigors and experiences of higher education without alienating students in the already intimidating university space. To this end, one participant stated that:

"For example, when you teach things like prefixes and suffixes in an education course, this can be done in other languages [home languages]. I know this is not always the case. But where possible, using home languages is helpful."

In support, another participant added that:

"My home language plays a role in my learning. When I go to class, I go with someone that I know from way back [who speaks the same language]. Most of the time, we do not communicate in English but in Sepedi. My language does play a role in my learning but not a big role."

These excerpts underscore the need to recognise other African languages and identities as legitimate in the classroom. This observation aligns with Kumalo's (2022, 116) argument that in sidelining African languages when considering the languages of instruction, "higher education institutions tend to construct students' home identity and languages as a problem that has to be fixed". However, the capacity of African languages to carry the weight of academic discourses, vocabularies and knowledges was also questioned by the other participants, as can

be noticed in the following excerpt:

“Let us say that I am doing Maths now, and I want to express something to my Sesotho friend – that will be extremely hard. I have to say – you need to take ‘Y’ and ‘X’ – how do I explain that in Sesotho?”

This indicates there is still a need to develop and promote other South African languages, and this is one of the recommendations of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2020, 5) language policy framework. The deliberate focus on the development of *Othered* African languages should not be interpreted as a call for the “intellectualisation” of the “village” languages, as this would be framing these languages as lacking intellectually and the communities that use these languages. Indeed, as Cele (2004, 51) points out, the development of indigenous languages needs to take place in response to the question, “Developing indigenous languages for what?”.

To explain the need for the development of African languages, the work of Mqgqwashu (2013) is helpful here. Based on his research on the use of isiZulu at one South African university, Mqgqwashu (2013) observed that the students had insufficient exposure to academic isiZulu (beyond Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills – BICS) within their intellectual repertoire. The students were mainly operating at BICS level and not at the expected Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) level. Cele’s (2004, 51) argument echoes this. Teaching all students the phonetics of isiZulu is not going to assist the average student who wants to use the language to “live a meaningful life”. Rather a differentiated approach should be taken with multiple exit points depending on student needs. This partly explains why students and teachers struggle to fully use African languages in the classroom. This is supported by two participants who stated the following:

“Using home languages can be problematic at some point. [This is because] we were taught in English from Primary school, and I do not know how certain modules and concepts can be taught in Sesotho. We embraced the other language [English] and did not develop our languages. Reading and writing in Sesotho is a problem for me.”

“You might think you understand your home language in depth, but when you come to here [university], and we say write a paper now in class using your Sesotho language – how can you come up with 2000 words of an academic paper in Sesotho or isiXhosa?”

While acknowledging the role of African languages, these observations recognise the inherent shortcomings and how EMI closes the gap. The participants also contributed to the great “language betrayal” debate of Achebe and wa Thiong’o. Achebe (1975, 62) asked, “is it right

that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling". While wa Thiong'o (1986) sees it as betrayal, Achebe takes ownership of the English language and tames it to carry the weight of his African experiences. The participants indirectly acknowledge both the wa Thiong'o and the Achebe position in the context of the classroom medium of instruction. Both indigenous languages and English present a necessary beneficial interaction of the different languages and identities. The discussion about the language of instruction and its connection to belonging in higher education should not necessarily be a case of "either or" but a convivial mosaic of languages and being in the teaching and learning community. One of the participants briefly captured this:

"It is a matter of balancing languages. I am Sotho, but when I embrace English [as EMI], I do not feel I am abandoning my language and who I am. It is a mindset thing. I balance everything out. All these languages have a role to play."

This is a call for the diversity and ecologies of languages, where EMI co-exists with other languages. A potential of "worlds and knowledges otherwise", a "world where other worlds" (Escobar 2020, 129) and their languages and bodies can all exist, where civilisations can have a dialogue and languages and identities can participate in transcultural conversations.

EMI and epistemic access

The third theme that arose from the student data concerned EMI and its link to epistemic access, epistemic belonging and academic citizenship. In defining "epistemic access", we turn to the Morrow (1994) who used the term in an article in which he argues that access to education has two dimensions (Du Plooy and Zilindile 2014). The first is formal or institutional access, and the second is access to the knowledge distributed by a particular institution (i.e., epistemological access). Although Morrow's definition and use of the term has been criticized by researchers such as Gamede (2005) as cited in Du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) for his neglecting to mention hidden curricula and marginalized forms of knowledge, we have chosen to use this rather simple definition due to the scope of our research. In other words, our reference to epistemological access is solely to students' access (or lack thereof) to knowledge. Morrow (2009) further points to the relationship between epistemic access and epistemic belonging as epistemic access determines one's sense of (un)belonging and participation in an academic community. Epistemic access, which includes "learning how to become a participant in an academic practice" (Morrow 2009, 77), is a cognitive process that is inclusive of students' identity, agency and ontology. Central to access is legitimation as access determines one's sense of belonging to a "... meaningful group or 'social network', to signal (that one is playing) a socially

meaningful 'role', or to signal that one is filling a social niche in a distinctively recognisable fashion" (Gee 2012, 158).

Interestingly, the data gathered from the student participants regarding the impact of EMI, as a structure, on epistemological access was mixed. In order to ascertain students' thoughts on the impact of this structure on their access to knowledge, students were asked questions such as, "How do you feel about studying mostly in English instead of having classes in your home language or any other language?", "Do you see the benefits of studying in English?", "What are the pitfalls of studying in English?", and "Who benefits from English being the medium of instruction, why?". While many indicated that there are some advantages to having English as the *primary* language of instruction and production in higher education, there were also those who clearly outlined the disadvantages in terms of impacting upon their learning. The advantages of EMI that the students mentioned were more with reference to the sense of belonging it gives them and the connections it allows them to establish with other students in the institution (as argued above). Again, EMI can thus have an enabling impact on students' sense of being and belonging within the institution.

Pertinent to mention here is one particularly interesting moment in the first focus group during which the four participants responded with a resounding "no" (with some laughter), when asked if they would take up an opportunity to study in their home languages. One student explained why: "It wouldn't make sense studying Psychology in Sepedi Like, certain concepts, certain theories, it is going to be difficult for them to be interpreted in Sepedi or Sesotho. English is easier, with English, everything is easier." He later commented, however, that his home language *does* play a role in his education, and when asked if he uses Sepedi at all in his learning, he said that,

"In most cases, [I will] speak Sepedi, yes, because I make sure when I go to class, I go with someone I know, someone I know from way back [who speaks Sepedi], and most of the time, we don't really communicate in English that much. So, it's Sepedi. That's why I said, my home language plays a role in teaching and learning, but it is not that important role or a huge role, but it does play a role."

It is interesting that this student's understanding of the role of language in education seems to be framed by his understanding of the current hegemonic place of English in higher education. He seems to believe English is the most appropriate language for his education, while his home language, Sepedi, plays second fiddle. The perception of this student, as well as many of the others who took part in this research, is that their home languages are not considered as having equal educational or commercial value as English, which was touched on earlier. Several

students commented on the advantages of studying in English when it comes to travelling and searching for employment, and there is a general perception that indigenous languages play no role in developing them as African students (Mutasa 2015). Mayaba et al. (2018, 2) also argue that these perceptions of English and indigenous languages have “conditioned the minds of students to believe that their success in a globalized and capitalist world depends solely on the mastery of the English language”.

However, despite this culture (i.e., the perception of the role of English in education as a vertical code signifying upward mobility [Bangeni and Kapp 2007]), a number of pitfalls to EMI were also mentioned by the students, specifically regarding engaging with learning materials (i.e., epistemological access). For example, one student said the following in response to the question, “If you could study in a language of choice, would you?”:

“I would have love to do, not everything in Sesotho, but I would have loved for there to be an option. You know, there’s nothing more exciting than having an option. You know, like, ‘this is an English language classroom, but if you feel like you would like to express yourself in Sesotho, please do so’. I would have loved for there to have been an option for that Some of these big words, if they had been written in Sesotho, then perhaps I would have done more well in some aspects of my learning.”

Another student also said that some students may benefit more from studying in English than others. She said, “It also comes back to how privileged you are because you get some kids who are from a different background to ours, so learning English for them could be very difficult”. She followed this up with a comment that although she feels all students benefit from EMI, there are some that benefit more than others. Finally, one of the undergraduate students responded that the number one pitfall to EMI is understanding:

“Understanding is number 1. Some [students] come from schools where the home language is Sotho, so it’s hard to understand how to construct a word in English, to understand you when you’re speaking to me. The pitfall is understanding and thinking in English and acting in English, doing everything in English, it’s so hard.”

What these students point out is the difficulty in understanding, thinking and acting in English. Their comments are in keeping with current literature on learning in a second language and on ontological refashioning as part of epistemic access in higher education. In a very similar study on student’s opinions on the “disfavour” of indigenous languages in higher education, Makhanya and Zibane (2020) had similar findings. The use of English in education can indeed be a barrier for some students (Makalela 2016; Ralarala et al. 2018; Ngubane and Makua 2021), and, as argued by Ralarala et al. (2018, 182–183), language is the mediator of our perception

of reality and,

“... if our command, our knowledge, our usage of a particular language ... is poor or weak, it stands to reason that our ability to understand our environment and the world around us will be characterized by conceptual and terminological limitations ... language embeds and bears our knowledge, our understanding and our comprehension.”

CONCLUSION

The scope of this research project is relatively small, and so we do not claim that our data and analysis is necessarily generalizable across all students and all South African higher education institutions. Having said this, much of the data captured was in keeping with other research in this area, and our aim was to capture the voices of a group of students with the hope of contributing some understanding to the complex and contested issues of EMI and multilingualism. The main takeaways from this study are that EMI as a structure at higher education institutions can be both enabling and constraining for second language speakers of English. It can be enabling in terms of assisting students develop a sense of belonging within their institutions, and in providing them with greater opportunities to make connections with a host of fellow students from different backgrounds, races and language groups.

However, this sense of being and belonging seems to be somewhat conditional and dependent upon context; several participants mentioned that language plays a major role in their need to self-edit, resulting in an on-campus and off-campus identity. Students also commented on the occasional feeling of inferiority when conversing with students who are proficient in English. EMI also has a role to play in teaching and learning beyond epistemological access. Indeed, learning how to become a participant in an academic practice is a complex process of being, becoming and belonging; it is an ontological reframing that includes shifts in identity and establishing a new sense of agency. Finally, the researchers noticed the ambivalent attitude students have towards their home languages in the classroom. The students' affiliation, loyalty and sense of belonging in their home languages does not necessarily mean they want to study in those languages. This presents a challenge to institutional drives in promoting multilingualism in South Africa as per the new language policy for higher education (DHET 2020).

REFERENCES

- Achebe, Chinua. 1965. “English and the African Writer.” *Transition* 18: 27–30.
- Achebe, Chinua. 1975. *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London: Heinemann.
- Achebe, Chinua. 1989. *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays*. London: Doubleday Books.

- Altheide, David, Michael Coyle, Katie DeVriese, and Christopher Schneider. 2010. "Emergent Qualitative Document Analysis." In *Handbook of emergent methods*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, 127–154. New York: Guilford Press.
- Archer, Margaret. 1995. *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, Margaret. 1996. *Culture and agency: The place of culture in social theory*. (Revised edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, Margaret. 2000. *Being human: The problem of agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bangeni, Bongsi and Rochelle Kapp. 2007. "Shifting Language Attitudes in Linguistically Diverse Learning Environment in South Africa." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 28(4): 253–269.
- Boughey, Chrissie and Sioux McKenna. 2021. *Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives*. Cape Town: Africa Minds.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. "The economics of linguistic exchanges." *Social Science Information* 16: 645–668.
- Bourne, Jessica and Naomi Winstone. 2021. "Empowering students' voices: The use of activity-orientated focus groups in higher education research." *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 44(4): 352–365.
- Carolissen, Ronelle and Peace Kiguwa. 2018. "Narrative explorations of the micro-politics of students' citizenship, belonging and alienation at South African universities." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32(3): 1–11.
- Casale, Daniela and Dorrit Posel. 2011. "English language proficiency and earnings in a developing country: The case of South Africa." *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 40(4): 385–393.
- Cele, Nhlanhla. 2004. "'Equity of access' and 'equity of outcomes' challenged by language policy, politics and practice in South African higher education: The myth of language equality in education." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 18(1): 38–56.
- Constandius, Elmarie, Margaret Blackie, Ian Nell, Rhoda Malgas, Neeska Alexander, Evodia Setati, and Marianne Mckay. 2018. "#FeesMustFall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch University students' and lecturers' reactions." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32(2): 65–85.
- Crystal, David. 2003. *English as a global language*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Sousa Santos, Boaventura. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Dearden, Julie. 2014. *English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon*. British Council.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. 2020. *The language policy framework for public higher education institutions*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. 2021. *South African Survey of Student Engagement Report*. Pretoria: DHET.
- Du Plooy, Lucinda and Mphumzi Zilindile. 2014. "Problematising the concept epistemological access with regard to foundation phase education towards quality schooling." *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 4(1): 187–201.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2020. *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Etikan, Ilker, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, and Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim. 2016. "Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling." *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5(1): 1–4.
- Ge, James Paul. 2012. *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourse*. 4th Edition. Abingdon:

Routledge.

- Henderson, Marius and Julia Lange. 2017. *Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Kapp, Rochelle and Bongzi Bangeni. 2011. "A longitudinal study of students' negotiation of language, literacy and identity." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 29(2): 197–208.
- Kitzinger, Jenny. 1995. "Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups." *BMJ* 311: 299.
- Kumalo, Siseko. 2022. "The place of colonial languages in Decolonial philosophy and practice." In *Language, Culture and Decolonisation*, ed. David Boucher, 113–133, Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Leech, Nancy L. and Anthony J. Onwuegbuziey. 2007. "An array of qualitative data analysis tools: A call for data analysis triangulation." *School Psychology Quarterly* 22(4): 557–584.
- Leibowitz, Brenda, Hanelie Adendorff, Shariefa Daniels, Ansie Loots, Siphon Nakasa, Nosipiwo Ngxabazi, Antoinette van der Merwe, and Idilette van Deventer. 2005. "The relationship between identity, language and teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa." *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning* 21(2): 23–37.
- Madiba, Mbulungeni. 2012. "Language and academic achievement: Perspectives on the potential role of indigenous African languages as a lingua academica." *Per Linguam* 28(2): 15–27.
- Malec, Jennifer. 2017. "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is the favourite to win the Nobel Prize in Literature – again", <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2017/10/03/the-jrb-daily-ngugi-wa-thiongo-is-the-favourite-to-win-the-nobel-prize-in-literature-again/>. (Accessed 23 August 2022).
- Makalela, Leketi. 2016. "Ubuntu translanguaging: An alternative framework for complex multilingual encounters." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 34(3): 187–196.
- Makalela, Leketi and Rose-Marie McCabe. 2013. "Monolingualism in a historically black South African university: A case of inheritance." *Linguistics and Education* 24(4): 406–414.
- Makhanya, Thembelihle and Sibonsile Zibane. 2020. "Students' voices on how indigenous languages are disfavoured in South African higher education." *Language Matters* 51(1): 22–37.
- Mayaba, Nokhanyo Nomakhwezi, Monwabisi Ralarala, and Pineteh Angu. 2018. "Student voice: Perspectives on language and critical pedagogy in South African higher education." *Educational Research for Social Change* 7(1): 1–12.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2021. *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*. Columbia University Press.
- Mgqwashu, Emmanuel. 2013. "On teaching reading for epistemological access." In *Alternative access to higher education: Underprepared students or underprepared institutions?* ed. Rubby Dhunpath and Renuka Vithal. Cape Town: Pearson.
- Milligan, Lizzi and Leon Tikly. 2016. "English as a medium of instruction in postcolonial contexts: moving the debate forward." *Comparative Education* 52(3): 277–280.
- Morrow, Wally. 1994. "Entitlement and achievement in Education." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 13: 33–47.
- Morrow, Wally. 2009. *Bounds of democracy: Epistemological access in higher education*. Hsrc Press.
- Mutasa, Davie. 2015. "Language Policy Implementation in South African Universities vis-à-vis the Speakers of Indigenous African Languages' Perception." *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning* 31(1): 46–59.
- Ngubane, Nomalungelo and Manyane Makua. 2021. "Intersection of Ubuntu pedagogy and social justice: Transforming South African higher education." *Transformation in Higher Education* 6(0): 1–8.
- OED. 2022. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 24 August 2022. <https://www.oed.com/>.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage.
- Pavlenko, Aneta and Adrian Blackledge. 2004. *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

- Ralarala, Monwabisi, E. Eunice Ivala, Ken Barris, Noleen Leach, Linda Manashe, and Zakhile Somlata. 2018. "Language development and multilingualism at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology." In *Multilingualism and intercultural communication: A South African perspective*, ed. Russell H. Kaschula, Pamela Maseko, and H. Ekkehard Wolff. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Sibanda, Brian. 2021. "Language as being in the politics of Ngugi wa Thiong'o." In *Decolonising the Human: Reflections from Africa on Difference and Oppression*, ed. Melissa Steyn and William Mporfu, 163–164. Johannesburg: Wits Press.
- Sibanda, Brian. 2022. "The place of colonial languages in Decolonial philosophy and practice." In *Language, Culture and Decolonisation*, ed. David Boucher, 47–64. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- The University of the Free State. 2022. "Academy for Multilingualism." <https://www.ufs.ac.za/about-the-ufs/ufs-in-focus/academy-for-multilingualism>. (Accessed 26 August 2022).
- The University of the Free State. 2016. "University of the Free State Language Policy." <https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/default-source/policy-institutional-documents/language-policy.pdf?sfvrsn=0>. (Accessed 26 August 2022).
- Todd, Zazie, Brigitte Nerlich, and Suzanne McKeown. 2004. "Introduction." In *Mixing methods in psychology: The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods in theory and practice*, ed. Zazie Todd, Brigitte Nerlich, Suzanne McKeown, and David D. Clarke. Hove, East Sussex: Psychology Press.
- UFS *see* The University of the Free State.
- wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. 1985. "Language as Carrier of People's Culture: An Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o." *UFAHAMU* 14(3): 156.
- wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. 1986. *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Walker, Melanie. 2005. *Higher Education Pedagogies*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Warda, Farah. Twitter post. 31 May 2022, 2:15 p.m. <https://twitter.com/WFarahslt/status/1531610205334781952>.