


# Chapter 12

## Indigenous Perspectives on Multilingualism in the South African Higher Education System

**Bisimwa Makanishe**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8298-2954>

*University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*

**Paulus Zulu**

*University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores students' and staff's voices from a university of technology on the feasibility of multilingualism based on their respective learning and teaching experiences in different academic disciplines. The chapter employs a mixed research methodology comprising students (n=665) and staff (n=5) surveys across five faculties of a university of technology. Participants mostly preferred English as the primary medium of instruction, citing cognitive, existential, and pragmatic reasons. Part of these reasons was that Indigenous languages have shortcomings in conveying scientific concepts as these did not exist in these languages. However, they also endorsed the view that a multilingual system comprising the use of English with Indigenous languages as support would enhance learning for students who experience difficulties with learning in English. The evidence highlights the paradoxical situation students at higher educational institutions face. Therefore, a balanced approach that enhances student competency in market-dominant mediums of instruction is required.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The study explores the views of students and academic staff regarding the implementation of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Language Policy of 2020. The policy addresses the language problem in the South African higher education system (DHET, 2020). It aims to promote multilingualism, intellectualise indigenous languages, and use them for scholarship (teaching, learning

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9296-6.ch012

and research). It also encourages students to learn international languages as essential drivers of cultural trade and diplomatic relations (Ibid). The Language Policy, therefore, requires institutions of higher learning, and universities in particular, to promote at least two indigenous languages in addition to their official language (English) as part of their official communication, teaching and learning, and research. This aligns with the national multicultural and multilingual makeup.

The policy provides for intellectualised languages to be used as languages of teaching, learning, and research. In line with expectations in post-colonial theory, this will end the dominance of English in academia. One of the arguments against the reliance on English as the sole medium of instruction in universities is the disenfranchisement (marginalisation) of not only indigenous languages as they remain undeveloped for intellectual purposes, but also the language speakers who encounter learning difficulties in English, barring them from accessing the much need education and consequently denying them access to the economic opportunities needed to improve their social status. However, internationally, the labour force is expected to be competitive in the context of globalisation, thus enhancing the status of English considering its academic, economic and social imperatives.

There are other imperatives that the policy aspires to achieve. The policy recognises the multi-ethnic composition of South Africa, together with its aspirations to achieve nation-building through the interaction among indigenous language speakers and their inclusion in the academic and economic life of the nation. Learning more than one indigenous language entails being prepared to undertake social and economic activities among other ethnic groups. The policy, therefore, realises that a balanced language policy approach is essential in preparing students to be prospective entrants in the local and international labour force.

However, student voices are largely missing in the language policy debate. Their views not only as primary beneficiaries of the policy but also as actors with first-hand experience of the language question in teaching and learning are vital to the policy's success in effecting social change. The study aims to consider the voices of students and lecturers regarding the feasibility of multilingualism, with a particular focus on indigenous languages as mediums of teaching and learning.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is a growing research interest in university language policies and their relevance to multilingualism in the context of incorporating indigenous languages. The drive for multilingualism is underpinned by the decolonisation perspectives, which emphasise the inclusion of indigenous populations in the formal education system, which, from its colonial inception, is conventionally dominated by Western languages, such as English, as a medium of instruction. Conversely, multilingualism invokes the need to internationalise universities amid ever-growing neoliberal globalisation. In this context, national and international policy imperatives in developing and developed nations compel universities to promote multilingualism.

### **Decolonisation Perspectives**

Theoretically, the promotion of multilingualism is underpinned by the relational dimension of decolonisation (Kessi et al., 2020). In their exposition on decolonising education in the African context, Kessi et al. distinguish four dimensions of the decolonisation agenda. These are structural, epistemic, personal

24 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/indigenous-perspectives-on-multilingualism-in-the-south-african-higher-education-system/373696](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/indigenous-perspectives-on-multilingualism-in-the-south-african-higher-education-system/373696)

## Related Content

---

### The Regulatory Trap: Quality Assurance and Control Cultures

Hans Ravi Aruldasand Viknesh Ponnusamy (2026). *Transforming Private Higher Education in Asia Through Creativity and Purpose* (pp. 103-138).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-regulatory-trap/399001](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-regulatory-trap/399001)

### Decolonizing Postgraduate Education: Infusing Indigenous Research Methodologies in Mainstream Science Education

Gordon Keabetswe Sekanoand Mothusiotsile Edwin Maditsi (2024). *Global Perspectives on Decolonizing Postgraduate Education* (pp. 42-54).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/decolonizing-postgraduate-education/347032](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/decolonizing-postgraduate-education/347032)

### Indigenous Perspectives on Multilingualism in the South African Higher Education System

Bisimwa Makanisheand Paulus Zulu (2025). *Indigenous Teaching Disciplines and Perspectives for Higher Education* (pp. 241-266).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/indigenous-perspectives-on-multilingualism-in-the-south-african-higher-education-system/373696](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/indigenous-perspectives-on-multilingualism-in-the-south-african-higher-education-system/373696)

### Assessment of Theses in Design Education: Conceptualizing a Co-Creative Process for Grading by Automated Criteria Evaluation

Nina Svenningsson, Montathar Faraonand Victor Villavicencio (2021). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 1-17).

[www.irma-international.org/article/assessment-of-theses-in-design-education/294567](http://www.irma-international.org/article/assessment-of-theses-in-design-education/294567)

### Expanding Access While Narrowing Outcomes: The Paradox of Malaysia's International Branch Campuses

Grace Karram Stephensonand Shakina Rajendram (2017). *The Future of Accessibility in International Higher Education* (pp. 88-103).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/expanding-access-while-narrowing-outcomes/181938](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/expanding-access-while-narrowing-outcomes/181938)