

The Perceptions and Attitudes of Students on the Intersectionality of Languages in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates students' perceptions and attitudes towards the intersectionality of language in the context of higher education in South Africa. Through a qualitative approach, the study collected data using semi-structured interviews involving fifteen participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The results of the thematic analysis revealed four key findings. First, the ongoing language barriers in the academic environment remain pronounced. Second, socio-cultural norms within communities have a significant influence on how individuals use language. Third, the implementation of multilingual policies advocated by institutions is still very limited and not optimal. Fourth, there is an urgency to build a stronger and more comprehensive support system for speakers from minority linguistic groups. Based on the theory of intersectionality, linguistic capital, and language ideology, this research shows how the enduring dominance of English continues to marginalize the role of indigenous languages and their speakers. These findings further underscore the significant gap between formally established language policies and the actual practices that occur on the ground. Therefore, systemic interventions are necessary to affirm and promote linguistic diversity. The conclusion of this study states that advancing multilingualism in higher education requires more than just written regulations. It demands the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy, the availability of learning resources in various languages, and a genuine institutional commitment to achieving language equality. Without those supporting elements, multilingual policies will only be discourse without having any substantial impact.

Keywords: higher education; intersectionality; language diversity; linguistic equity; multilingualism

Persepsi dan Sikap Mahasiswa terhadap Interseksionalitas Bahasa di Pendidikan Tinggi

Penelitian ini menyelidiki persepsi dan sikap mahasiswa terhadap interseksionalitas bahasa dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi di Afrika Selatan. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif, studi ini mengumpulkan data menggunakan wawancara semi-terstruktur yang melibatkan lima belas orang peserta dari beragam latar belakang linguistik dan budaya. Hasil analisis tematik mengungkapkan empat temuan kunci. Pertama, hambatan bahasa yang terus-menerus terjadi di lingkungan akademik masih sangat terasa. Kedua, norma-norma sosial budaya dalam komunitas memiliki pengaruh yang signifikan terhadap cara seseorang menggunakan bahasa. Ketiga, implementasi kebijakan multilingual yang dicanangkan oleh institusi masih sangat terbatas dan belum optimal. Keempat, terdapat urgensi untuk membangun sistem pendukung yang lebih kuat dan komprehensif bagi para penutur dari kelompok linguistik minoritas. Dengan berlandaskan pada teori interseksionalitas, modal linguistik, dan ideologi bahasa, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana dominasi bahasa Inggris yang masih sangat kental justru terus meminggirkan peran bahasa-bahasa pribumi serta para penuturnya. Temuan ini semakin menegaskan adanya kesenjangan yang lebar antara kebijakan bahasa yang ditetapkan secara formal dengan praktik nyata yang terjadi di lapangan. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan intervensi sistematis yang dapat mengafirmasi dan mempromosikan keanekaragaman bahasa. Simpulan dari studi ini menyatakan bahwa memajukan multilingualisme di perguruan tinggi memerlukan lebih dari sekadar peraturan tertulis. Hal ini menuntut diimplementasikannya pedagogi yang responsif secara budaya, ketersediaan sumber daya pembelajaran dalam berbagai bahasa, serta komitmen kelembagaan yang sungguh-sungguh untuk mewujudkan kesetaraan bahasa. Tanpa elemen-elemen pendukung tersebut, kebijakan multilingual hanya akan menjadi wacana tanpa memiliki dampak yang substansial.

Kata kunci: interseksionalitas; keberagaman bahasa; kesetaraan linguistic; multibahasa; perguruan tinggi

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of global higher education, linguistic and cultural diversity has become increasingly pronounced due to globalization and the expansion of transnational academic mobility. While an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 languages are spoken globally, only a fraction is formally used in educational institutions, particularly at the tertiary level (Romaine, 2007). This linguistic imbalance presents a critical challenge for universities aiming to provide inclusive and equitable learning environments (Abo-Khalil, 2024). In multilingual nations such as South Africa, this issue is especially significant. Despite having twelve constitutionally recognized official languages, including South African Sign Language (SASL), the dominance of English and Afrikaans as mediums of instruction often marginalizes indigenous languages and their speakers (Diko & Celliers, 2024). As a result, students who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds frequently encounter difficulties in comprehension, participation, and academic achievement (Selvathurai, 2024).

The primary issue at hand is the insufficient consideration given to African languages compared to English in higher education institutions. As these institutions evolve into increasingly diverse environments, often described as a "national village," the significance of language diversity and multilingualism becomes more pronounced. South Africa, with its 12 official languages, including the South African Sign Language, exemplifies this diversity (Reagan, 2020). However, the legacy of apartheid has established the dominance of Afrikaans and English as the primary languages of instruction, often neglecting the development and use of indigenous languages.

This situation requires a critical re-evaluation of the educational role and importance of African languages in higher education. Research has identified various challenges associated with English as a medium of instruction, including linguistic, identity-related, and cultural difficulties (Bhattarai, 2024). Furthermore, students have expressed that their comprehension of course content improves significantly when a mix of languages is used (Zengilowski et al., 2023). Therefore, fostering the development of indigenous languages as languages of instruction is essential to cultivate a truly diverse and multilingual academic environment (Tsaure & Sani, 2024). Several studies have underscored the disadvantages these students face, particularly in relation to academic integration and identity formation.

Previous research has addressed the role of language policies in higher education and the challenges surrounding the implementation of multilingualism (Beukes, 2012; Farr & Song, 2011; Madiba, 2013). Although national frameworks often promote the development of indigenous languages for academic purposes, the realities within many institutions do not reflect these ideals. Negative perceptions of local languages and the lack of institutional support and infrastructure have further hindered their integration. This disconnect between policy and practice highlights the need for critical examination.

Despite a growing body of work exploring multilingual education, a significant gap persists in understanding how students personally interpret and respond to the intersectionality of language within academic settings. Specifically, there is a lack of research that centres on students' subjective experiences and perceptions of linguistic inclusion or marginalisation. Few studies have investigated how students from linguistically diverse backgrounds perceive the dominance of English in university classrooms, nor how these dynamics influence their academic engagement and sense of belonging.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on student perspectives as the analytical lens for understanding linguistic diversity through the framework of intersectionality. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluate policy outcomes or institutional efforts, this research gives primacy to the voices of students who actively navigate the multilingual terrain of higher education. By integrating sociolinguistic theory with empirical accounts of student experience, the study offers a fresh contribution to the field by illuminating the everyday realities of language-based inclusion and exclusion in academic life.

This study adopts a theoretical lens rooted in intersectionality, as initially introduced by (Crenshaw, 2018) and extended to sociolinguistic contexts by Atewologun (2018), which allows for the analysis of how language intersects with other social markers such as race, class, and cultural identity. The research is also grounded in Bourdieu (1991) theory of linguistic capital, which conceptualizes language as a form of symbolic power that grants or denies access to social advantage. Within academic settings, English often functions as a dominant code imbued with prestige, while local languages are perceived as inferior, shaping hierarchies that affect students' academic trajectories. Additionally, the study draws on language ideology theory (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), which considers how societal values, institutional practices, and political histories construct perceptions of language legitimacy and usefulness.

This study aims to investigate how students perceive the intersectionality of languages within their experiences in higher education. By examining their attitudes toward different languages, including their mother tongues and the language of instruction, this research seeks to illuminate the complexities related to language use in academic environments. A thorough comprehension of these perceptions is crucial to inform language policies and practices that support inclusivity and equitable access to education for all students. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of language diversity in education and to inform more inclusive language policies that align with students lived realities. In doing so, the research highlights the imperative for institutions to foster linguistic pluralism not only as a pedagogical necessity but also as a foundation for academic equity and social cohesion.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions and attitudes of registered university students about the intersectionality of languages in higher education. This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of students' experiences and perceptions related to language use in academic contexts. By prioritising qualitative methods, the study aims to provide a rich narrative that reflects the diverse realities of the linguistic experiences of the students. The methodology emphasises semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method.

Participants consisted of 15 registered university students from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, studying different courses at various faculties. The sample included participants ranging from first- to fourth-year students, essential for capturing a broad spectrum of perspectives on language intersectionality. A convenience sampling technique was used to collect data based on the availability and willingness of the participants to participate in the study. A convenience sampling technique was employed in this study due to the dispersed nature of the student population across various faculties and the practical limitations in accessing participants through probabilistic methods. This approach was deemed appropriate for capturing a diverse range of linguistic and cultural experiences within a limited timeframe and resource context. As the aim of the research was to explore in-depth perspectives rather than generalize findings, convenience sampling enabled the inclusion of participants who were readily available and willing to provide rich, reflective insights into their experiences with language intersectionality in higher education.

The participants were current university students enrolled in any qualification, ensuring representation from various faculties and departments. This inclusivity was vital to capture the multifaceted nature of language intersectionality in Institution of higher learning in South Africa (UNISA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing a combination of predefined questions and the flexibility to explore emerging topics during conversations. This structure facilitates a deeper understanding of individual experiences and supports the emergence of topics relevant to this study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews were contact both in their home language and English.

The key areas of focus in the interview questions included the following: 1) how can multilingualism and language diversity be promoted in higher education institutions and communities? To explore this question, the following sub questions were examined: 1) what are the perceptions toward English as a language of teaching and learning? 2) what are the attitudes toward the use of indigenous languages? 3) what do language policies say about bilingualism and multilingualism?

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts. This process involved several key steps: transcription, coding, and theme development. (1) Transcription: All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the voices of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006); (2) Coding: Using ATLAS.ti, initial codes were generated based on the recurring themes and patterns identified in the data. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data and generated initial and axial codes, which is the second phase of coding in ATLAS.ti software; (3) Theme Development: The codes generated were grouped into broader themes that encapsulate the essence of students' experiences and perceptions regarding language intersectionality and its subthemes. The study underwent an ethical clearance process (2595_2024_PRC_REC_007) to ensure compliance with ethical research practices. Adherence to ethical considerations was crucial to the success of this study, including obtaining informed consent from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following four themes were identified: 1) Language barriers in higher education; 2) influence of the community on the language of instruction; promotion of multilingualism in higher education; 3) support for Linguistic Minorities.

Language Barriers in Higher Education

The participants highlighted the academic challenges that hinder their success in progressing through university, particularly in relation to limited English proficiency. These linguistic challenges emerged as a central theme across multiple interviews. Participant Q stated, "I normally struggle to understand my study material and will resort to my peers to interpret concepts difficult to grasp." This points to the informal reliance on peer networks to mediate academic content, a survival strategy often adopted by students lacking fluency in the language of instruction. For many students, especially those from rural or economically disadvantaged areas, the transition to English-dominant academic settings represents not only a linguistic challenge but also a profound cultural shift.

This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of Bourdieu (1991) theory of linguistic capital, which views language as a form of symbolic power that can reproduce social inequality. In the university context, fluency in English is not merely a communication skill it is an asset that grants access to resources, academic credibility, and classroom participation (Aljarelah, 2024; Dewan & Sharma, 2025; Yuditseva, 2023). Students who lack this capital find themselves structurally marginalized. This marginalization manifests not only in academic underperformance but also in lowered self-confidence and reduced engagement. Participant K remarked, "I experience difficulty understanding lectures," while others reported being hesitant to speak during class discussions out of fear of being ridiculed for "broken English."

The fear of linguistic exposure in public academic spaces is consistent with research by (Giang, 2025), found that language barriers in higher education contexts often lead to feelings of alienation and self-censorship among students. This fear disrupts the learning process, as students may avoid asking questions or clarifying content. As Participant Q shared: "I struggle to talk in class because I don't want to be isolated from my peers." Such anxieties are not trivial; they reflect deeper institutional cultures that implicitly uphold English as the sole legitimate academic language while offering little structural support for alternative linguistic expressions.

From the perspective of language ideology Woolard & Schieffelin (1994), these barriers are symptomatic of institutional norms that priorities dominant languages at the expense of local ones.

Even when universities are situated in multilingual societies, their curricula, assessments, and classroom practices often fail to reflect this linguistic plurality. The result is a disconnect between the students' linguistic realities and the expectations of academic performance. Many participants described experiencing mental fatigue when reading academic texts in English, often needing to reread passages multiple times or translate them into their mother tongue for comprehension.

Furthermore, the challenges are compounded by a lack of multilingual academic resources. Participants noted the scarcity of textbooks, lecture slides, and instructional videos available in indigenous languages. Even when institutional policies support multilingualism in theory, the material infrastructure such as translation services, language support centers, and bilingual lecturers remains underdeveloped.

The emotional toll of these barriers is substantial. Students reported feelings of inadequacy, shame, and frustration, which sometimes led to withdrawal from academic or social activities. For example, Participant R expressed, "Even when I know the answer, I hesitate to speak because I fear my accent or grammar will be laughed at." This type of self-silencing behavior highlights how language barriers are not merely technical difficulties but are fundamentally about identity, inclusion, and access to academic opportunity (Tyler et al., 2022).

To address these systemic issues, institutions must reconceptualize language support not as remedial, but as integral to educational equity. This involves not only offering language training for students, but also developing pedagogies that affirm multiple linguistic repertoires as valid and valuable within the academic space. As noted by Xulu-Gama & Hadebe (2022), transformative multilingual policies must be accompanied by culturally responsive teaching practices that empower all learners, regardless of their primary language. Without such shifts, language will continue to function as an invisible gatekeeper, reinforcing academic hierarchies and undermining the potential of linguistically diverse student populations.

Influence of the community on the language

Culture and language significantly influence individual identity processes (Arslan et al., 2024). Although individuals have an obligation to maintain their linguistic heritage, the dominance of commonly spoken languages and Western cultural influences often compel students to conform to the use of English. Participant J acknowledged that they adhere to this pressure, leading to a devaluation of their indigenous languages. Additionally, there is a generational gap, where parents encourage their children to speak English, creating a language gap.

Most future generations struggle to communicate with their parents in their mother tongues due to social influences (Cox et al., 2021). The participants said that indigenous languages should be used in cultural events to encourage the identification of young people with their languages. They advocated for family policies that require children to speak their native languages at home to preserve generational knowledge. The community and royal houses should promote indigenous languages to help children identify with them, facilitating smoother language transitions.

These reflections are deeply embedded in the sociohistorical dynamics of postcolonial language use. From a language ideology perspective Woolard & Schieffelin (1994), the participants' testimonies illustrate how community norms and broader societal discourses shape attitudes toward language legitimacy. English, in many South African communities, is perceived as the language of upward mobility, global connectivity, and intellectual authority. Indigenous languages, by contrast, are often seen as markers of tradition, rurality, or even backwardness an ideological framing that is a legacy of colonial and apartheid-era language hierarchies (Makoni, 2013).

This internalized ideology explains why many parents despite their own fluency in local languages encourage their children to adopt English as their primary language. This phenomenon, referred to by Baker-Bell (2020) as "linguistic self-erasure," represents an identity compromise where individuals consciously or subconsciously distance themselves from their linguistic heritage to align with dominant norms. The participants' concerns about language loss among youth thus reflect both

intergenerational anxieties and institutional failures to validate linguistic diversity within mainstream discourse.

The consequences of this language shift are not limited to interpersonal communication. Language is deeply tied to culture, identity, and worldview (Kalra & Danis, 2024). As such, when younger generations become alienated from their mother tongues, they risk losing access to traditional knowledge systems, oral histories, and cultural values. Participants' advocacy for cultural events and family-level language policies reflects a recognition of this risk and a desire to reclaim linguistic identity through intentional practice. This aligns with Crenshaw (2018) intersectionality theory, where language intersects with generational status, cultural belonging, and systemic marginalization to shape lived experiences.

Moreover, the participants' references to community and royal houses highlight the importance of collective action in reversing language decline. As Atewologun (2018) points out, identity maintenance in multilingual societies requires support not only from formal institutions but also from informal cultural structures. Traditional authorities can play a strategic role in language revitalization by institutionalizing the use of indigenous languages in public rituals, education, and civic engagement.

In this context, schools and universities are not the only spaces where language inclusion must occur. Homes, churches, local media, and community organizations are equally significant sites for promoting multilingualism (Mouboua et al., 2024). A holistic approach that bridges family, community, and institutional spaces is necessary to protect and revitalize linguistic heritage (Hutson et al., 2024). As suggested by the participants, promoting indigenous languages at the community level can foster intergenerational solidarity and deepen youth engagement with cultural identity.

Thus, the influence of community on language choices among university students is neither incidental nor apolitical. It is a result of entrenched ideological systems that favour linguistic assimilation over diversity. Challenging this trend requires collective, culturally grounded interventions that empower families and communities to reclaim and revalue their linguistic legacies.

Promotion of Multilingualism in Higher Education

The necessity of institutional policies was emphasized during the discussions. Participants noted the importance of being acquainted with language policies, especially with the South African government's introduction of language policy in higher education institutions in 2023 to address high failure rates. Many students are not familiar with these policies, as implementation varies between universities. Participant Q suggested that "education must be approached in an African-centered perspective. Decolonization of the university structure and method of teaching and learning." This highlights a demand for transformative approaches that legitimize indigenous languages as academic tools.

Participant M highlighted the need for multilingual course offerings, stating that course materials should be made available in multiple languages to accommodate indigenous knowledge. "Make indigenous material more accessible to students by promoting locally published work instead of using primarily westernized material to describe a South African context." This sentiment reflects a broader call for universities to embrace language diversity for the benefit of all students (Wijayanti, 2024). Additionally, participants suggested that translators should be made available for course materials that have not yet been translated. These reflections reveal a policy-practice gap similar to the one outlined in Hu (2023), indicating inconsistencies in how multilingual initiatives are operationalized across institutions.

These findings expose the limitations of symbolic language policies that are not backed by structural support and pedagogical reform. While national frameworks may formally endorse multilingualism, the implementation often remains superficial, with little attention to the practical needs of students. As Kgosiemang (2025) note, institutional multilingualism must be enacted across curriculum design, assessment practices, and academic resources not merely within policy documents.

When universities fail to translate multilingual policies into concrete practices, they risk reproducing the very linguistic inequalities such policies seek to redress.

The demand for multilingual teaching materials and faculty training is particularly urgent in a postcolonial context. According to Makoni (2013), decolonial language practices require the decentering of Western epistemologies and the validation of local knowledge systems. When participants advocate for African-centred pedagogy and the promotion of indigenous material, they are calling for a shift in the intellectual foundations of the academy. This reorientation aligns with intersectionality theory, which recognizes the layered exclusions faced by students situated at the margins of both language and identity (Crenshaw, 2018).

Participants also suggested faculty training on inclusive pedagogies. “We need more workshops to learn our mother languages,” noted Participant K. Such interventions align with the goals of linguistic inclusion and represent a proactive strategy to combat linguistic marginalization. Given that higher education institutions cater to national and international students, support programmes that encourage the acquisition of local languages can also reduce issues of xenophobia and social exclusion. As noted by Participant L, “The barrier that limits language diversity in our country is literacy.” These narratives underline the role of institutions in actively promoting inclusive language practices through structural support.

Furthermore, promoting multilingualism in higher education is not merely about language use it is about epistemic justice. When students can access knowledge in languages that resonate with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their engagement deepens, and their sense of belonging strengthens. Participant K’s mention of workshops and the need to learn mother tongues points toward a desire for educational spaces that validate rather than marginalize linguistic diversity. Universities, therefore, must consider not only policy reform but also the transformation of pedagogical practices, faculty development, and institutional culture.

In sum, this theme underscores that multilingualism in higher education must move beyond policy declarations toward actionable, systemic change. Institutions must invest in multilingual resources, provide training for staff, adapt curriculum content, and actively support the presence of indigenous languages within academic discourse. Without such comprehensive efforts, the promise of language inclusivity will remain rhetorical rather than real.

Support for Linguistic Minorities

The success of students in higher education is significantly influenced by the support they receive upon entering the university. The participants expressed a strong need for academic support in the form of tutorial classes offered in different languages. In instances where a specific tutor is not proficient in a student’s language, cross-teaching should be employed to accommodate diverse linguistic needs. Participant L suggested implementing mentoring programmes across all courses, facilitated by peers who speak different languages, as peer-to-peer mentoring is critical to promoting student success (Lorenzetti et al., 2020).

The discussions also covered the importance of providing counselling services in multiple languages, allowing students to feel comfortable in expressing themselves. The participants said that students should have the option to choose a counsellor who speaks their language. Furthermore, the establishment of “Student Organizations for Linguistic Minorities” was recommended, where students from marginalized language communities could collaborate, share their concerns, and learn other languages together without feeling excluded. These initiatives reflect the intersectional disadvantages that many students face, where linguistic identity intersects with socio-economic and cultural vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 2018; Atewologun, 2018). Creating diversity and inclusion offices that actively support language equity could address these gaps, offering systemic redress for historically marginalized linguistic groups.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that linguistic intersectionality significantly shapes students' academic experiences in South African higher education. Thematic findings showed that English language dominance continues to marginalize students from indigenous linguistic backgrounds, leading to academic exclusion, reduced confidence, and cultural disconnection. Community influences further reinforce language shift, often pressuring students to abandon their home languages. While national policies promote multilingualism, participants reported a lack of meaningful implementation, limited multilingual resources, and insufficient faculty training. These findings imply that linguistic equity in education cannot be achieved through policy alone it requires systemic change across institutional structures. Universities should invest in multilingual academic support, develop culturally responsive teaching practices, and embed indigenous languages meaningfully into curricula and campus life. Policy makers must ensure the operationalization of inclusive language frameworks, while educators are encouraged to validate students' linguistic identities as assets, not deficits. Promoting linguistic justice is not only a matter of academic access but also of cultural affirmation and social inclusion.

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