

Fitting in, figuring it out: Attitudes to English at a South African university

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ABSTRACT

Students at South African higher education institutions typically need to use English as their language of learning and teaching. One of the objectives of this study was to explore what students felt about this, and how their perceptions and practices were linked to their identities. Small focus group discussions were held with students at a South African university. A framework of New Literacy Studies was used, which views student learning as a process of mastering discipline-specific, socially constructed norms and values, and sees the adoption of any kind of literacy as including the adoption of an identity. Critical Discourse Analysis was then applied to the transcripts of these discussions. Two of the Discourses re-

vealed in this way were the 'Model C was better' and the 'English to fit in' Discourse. The former was a Discourse of deficit, with students attributing academic success to those who experienced 'good' schooling from ex-Model C schools and so were proficient in English. 'English to fit in', by contrast, was a Discourse underpinned by quiet pride in the students' own multilingualism. It is argued that deficit discourses need to be noted and, if possible, countered, if efforts to improve students' levels of academic literacy are to succeed.

Keywords: Attitudes to English, discourse analysis, university, discourse of deficit, identity, self-worth through multilingual competence

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1. Introduction

In South Africa, with its 12 official languages, the issue of language and social identity is a complex one. Language changes all the time, but people often cling to the old forms and outdated metaphors because language is not only used to communicate information, but also as something to think and feel with, and to signal and negotiate social identity (Gee, 1990). Language use “both reflects and creates one’s social position and identity in the interaction”, as the interaction affects the language use (Siegel, 2003, p. 183). This view illustrates why the question of what role language should play in education is a contentious issue in South Africa (Tyler, Ramadiro, McKinney, & Guzula, 2022; Joubert & Sibanda, 2022).

This article draws on a PhD study investigating the reading practices of students at the rural University of Fort Hare campus in South Africa.

My research questions were:

- (1) What Discourses constrain or enable the emergence of Fort Hare students’ reported academic reading practices?
- (2) What do the Discourses used by Fort Hare students reveal about their identities, both as members of the academic community and outside the academic community? This article, however, focuses on two of the Discourses that were used when the mostly isiXhosa-speaking students talked about their use of English: namely, the ‘Model C was better’ and the ‘English to fit in’ Discourses.

Language use is a concern on the University of Fort Hare campus, as students attend from across Africa, speaking a multitude of languages, with isiXhosa dominating. Very nearly all University of Fort Hare students are therefore required to become academically literate in an additional language. Such South African universities in rural areas, which are largely poor, draw their students from those same areas, meaning students here often struggle to pay fees (Council on Higher Education, 2016). In the past, such rural areas were the most disadvantaged in terms of racialised inequalities (Hendricks, 2004). On top of this, such rural universities themselves tend to be historically disadvantaged (Council on Higher Education, 2016). Before the first democratic election in 1994, the public higher education system had been “fractured along a number of lines” (Boughey, 2012, p. 133). The two main fractures occurring along lines of race (with white students receiving more government resources than black students), and location (with a number of universities, including University of Fort Hare, established specifically for black students in the rural areas of so-called

'homelands' with poor infrastructure). Many of the students registered on the University of Fort Hare campus come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, with 98% depending on financial aid (SABC, 2023).

So perhaps it is to be expected that a theme that appeared over and over again in focus group discussions with students was that of the English language – specifically, students' perceptions that language abilities, as developed (or not developed) in their younger years played a definitive role in both their reading practices and their abilities to cope with their studies at university level. Analysis of those views revealed links between students' perceptions of their own identities, language use, and racial politics of the past and present. This is not surprising. The history of apartheid helped to ensure that language use in South Africa was linked to issues of power and privilege (Buthelezi, 2008) – and still is. For years, English and Afrikaans were the only official languages, while indigenous languages were sidelined (Buthelezi, 2008). In 1996, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was published, officially recognising 11 languages: isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Siswati, Setswana, Sesotho and Sepedi, as well as English and Afrikaans (GCIS, 2016). However, although these changes occurred years ago, the links between English use, privilege, and power remain today. The following sections expand on these links, focusing on the Discourses that emerged when Englishes were discussed. The term “Englishes” is frequently used in the field of linguistics, notably by scholars like Kamwangamalu (2006).

It should be noted that this study is limited in its scope. The major limitation is the small scale of this research. Ideally, research should synthesise many descriptive accounts; detail specific achievements; and test different models in different communities (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). However, because of limited resources, this study did not reach this ideal. The fact that I am a white person, interviewing black students, was also a limitation. Not only is “social desirability bias” believed to cause participants to put on a performance for interviewers when answering attitudinal questions, but “stereotype threat” can come into play, meaning that participants can feel that they are being judged in terms of a stereotype when questioned by someone outside of their group (Davis & Silver, 2003, p. 34, 35). For similar reasons, it is possible that students who were not voluble during the discussions might have been protecting their identities.

2. Theoretical framework

This study uses a framework of New Literacy Studies (NLS), which views student learning as a process of mastering discipline-specific, socially constructed norms and

values, and sees the adoption of any kind of literacy as including the adoption of an identity.

The 'ideological' view of literacy is central to NLS. According to this view, the meaning of 'literacy' and the meaning given to literacy practices depend on the social institutions in which the practices are embedded (Street, 1984). The ideological model of literacy conceives of literacy as a social practice, always entrenched in socially constructed epistemological principles, and so always contested. It is the ideological view that literacy is not separate from its political and social forms; and the processes involved in teaching reading and writing are what construct the meanings of reading and writing, and the ways in which these practices are valued (Street, 1984). This 'social practices' view developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Brandt & Clinton, 2002).

Two points about NLS had particular relevance for the theoretical framework of this study. The first point is that NLS is informed by the sociology of knowledge, anthropology and critical discourse studies (Lillis & Scott, 2007). The second point is that one of the main methodologies used when drawing on an ideological model of literacy is ascertaining participants' perspectives on practices (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Bearing these points in mind, and the fact that this study attempts to understand students' own perspectives on their reading practices, it seemed clear from the start that a discourse analysis of students' own words would be a vital part of the research.

Critical realism is the ontological underpinning of this study. Revealing the causal mechanisms that produce social phenomena – that is, explaining social processes and events – is the main aim of critical realist research (Danermark, et al., 1997; Fairclough, 2005). Critical realists maintain that when we ask about a structure generating a particular power, we are asking about a mechanism generating an event – a generative 'mechanism' not being a 'machine', but the operative part or process in a system that produces a result (Wight, 2004). Such mechanisms tend to act when triggered (Collier, 1994). The word 'tend' is important here, drawing attention to the exercised but unrealised tendencies.

Discourses exist in the world as material realities (Gee, 2011). This can be understood if we think of the way in which people engage in recognition work; in other words, trying to make visible to themselves and to others who they are and what they are doing (Gee, 2011). Recognition work and Discourse create each other, and such processes become visible when we judge what is 'acceptable' and what is not (Gee, 2011). In this way, discourse is an example of a causal mechanism in the lens of critical realism: Sayer (2000) maintains that discourses can have an effect – such as when we treat people as if they were X, this can sometimes, and to some degree, *make* them X.

The aim of this study was therefore to uncover a variety of Discourse-as-mechanisms, using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis. This means that the study aimed to identify the tendencies of certain mechanisms (in this case, Discourses) to affect students' reading practices, by analysing transcripts of focus group discussions held with 30 students. Frameworks and tools provided by Fairclough (2003) and Gee (1990, 2011, 2014) were applied when analysing data. In the NLS tradition, discourse has also been found to be a mediating mechanism in the social construction of identity (Ivanič, 1998), so a critical discourse analysis was applied to begin understanding aspects of these students' reading practices and the links between these and their identities.

Here the researcher follows Gee's (1999, 2005, 2011) nomenclature. Gee's concept of 'discourses' with a small 'd', means "language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)" (Gee, 2005, p. 26). These 'discourses' form part of 'Discourses' with a capital 'D', which he sees as a performance – including reading, writing and talking in certain ways – and recognition of identities (Gee, 1999). Gee (2014) has 26 tools of discourse analysis, each 'tool' being a question that the analyst can ask of the data, based on what the speaker has said. For instance, the Significance Building tool is a question that asks: Which things and people in this context are relevant and significant and how? How does the speaker give significance to things? The Activities Building tool is a question that asks: What practices are relevant and how are they being enacted? Other questions focus on the way the speaker refers to, performs or highlights identities, relationships, languages, and social goods. One of Gee's (2014) 26 tools of discourse analysis that is relevant here is called the Big 'C' Conversation, which takes the form of a question about whether the communication is carrying out an old or widely known debate or discussion between Discourses (Gee, 2014).

3. Literature review

Language policies have changed over the decades in South Africa, but currently, from the fourth year of schooling, most assessments are implemented in English or Afrikaans (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016), meaning that little has changed since those two languages were the only official ones in the country. The South African Social Attitudes Survey, which is administered by the Human Sciences Research Council and is nationally representative, seems to reveal that in 2016 and 2018 there was widespread popular support for English as the language of instruction for all during the Foundation Phase. (However, it also seems that the phrasing of this particular survey question about language, forces respondents to choose between English and mother-tongue education (Gordon & Harvey, 2019)).

English in South Africa has a long history of being regarded as a symbol for modernisation and education (Bongani & Kapp, 2007). Literate practices of communities tend to be woven together with ways of achieving status, among other things (Heath, 1983) and being able to speak English fluently is one way to achieve status among many South Africans. In contemporary times, English has far more prestige than any other language: symbolising the elite and modernity, and linking people in a multilingual society (Kamwangamalu, 2006). It is the most widely used language in the media, too, and in communication between government departments (Kamwangamalu, 2006). Black South Africans, though, often have an ambivalent attitude towards English, as using the language can provide access, but it also acts as a barrier, threatening the maintenance of African languages (Kamwangamalu, 2006). The prestige attached to English also contributes to the “normativity of whiteness and [...] othering of blackness” (McKinney, 2013, p. 23). An extension of this is that young people can wield a certain symbolic power by speaking a particular variety of English (McKinney, 2013).

Other reasons for using English are that African languages do not all offer the terminology needed for subject teaching; nor are there sufficient textbooks published in African languages (Probyn, 2009; Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). The dominance of English textbooks, among other complex reasons outlined here, can sometimes lead to teachers being unwilling to use African-language textbooks when they are available and seeing them as detrimental to the learners’ development of English proficiency (Tyler & McKinney, 2024). The result is that those whose home language is an African language continue to be educationally disadvantaged: the schooling system forces them to acquire a form of subtractive bilingualism. This is when learning a second language interferes with the learning of a first language, which, in effect, devalues or even ‘replaces’ their home language (Broom, 2004). Bongani and Kapp (2007) even found that black students attending an historically ‘white’ and English-speaking university sometimes codemixed between English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa, along with a sprinkling of slang derived from Kwaito (a South African music form). One student described the resulting code as a “sort of in between language” (Bongani & Kapp, 2007, p. 265), with the authors pointing out that such a co-constructed hybrid space indicates the hybrid identities brought about by sociopolitical changes in South Africa.

Many South Africans use the label ‘coconut’ (black on the outside, but white on the inside) to refer to someone who speaks mostly English, or speaks a particular kind of English, or whom they consider to be ‘acting white’ (McKinney, 2013), which of course draws on “essentialist and static” discourses of race, as if ‘black’ or ‘white’ are homogenous categories (McKinney, 2007, p. 18). This is an illustration of the

complicated discourses in South Africa that link language, education, race, wealth and poverty, and various identities. Young South Africans frequently attach prestige to some kinds of English, such as 'posh' English associated with white people, but devalue others, such as "Black English associated with ... township schooling" (McKinney, 2007, p.15). In this way, racial categories have played a part in this categorisation, with the kinds of English spoken by white people becoming a form of cultural capital (McKinney, 2007).

Hendricks (2004, p. 109) maintains that "English is the language of power in South Africa", despite being the home language of only 10% of the population. For Soudien (2010), the very definition of "middle class" in South Africa encompasses not only economic factors such as home ownership, but also the tendency of parents to see it as vital that children grow up learning to speak English. Students participating in this study recognised the powerful role that language played in their educational experiences.

In South Africa, any talk of multilingualism tends to be part of an enormous Conversation about identities, educational access, power and literacy. Walker (2005) examines the life history narratives of South African students, drawing on Soudien's (2001) ideas of three kinds of discourses in education. The official discourse in 2003, the time of Walker's research, was that of South Africa being a 'rainbow nation', a discourse that emphasised freedom, the accommodation of differences, and critical enquiry (Walker, 2005) and so could be seen as the ultimate South African Discourse of diversity. Discourses collided with histories and contexts, and student identities and perceptions of race were highly complex. Universities, Walker (2005, p. 52) notes, are important locations for identity work, since they are "sites where discourses collide, are distorted or articulate". Similarly, it is possible that there is actually a tangle of mechanisms at work when students discussed the languages they speak, and how they came to acquire them. For young people to talk about the multiplicity of languages they were exposed to could be read as a celebration of diversity. Although the 'rainbow nation' discourse hit a euphoric note in 1995 after South Africa won the Rugby World Cup, the elation behind it diminished once new challenges in the country arose, at which point the official discourse became one of Africanness and transformation (Botma, 2010). For some years, the 'rainbow nation' identity was necessarily asserted frequently because it had an aspirational aspect (Gqola, 2004). However, researchers noted that the 'rainbow nation' discourse was being used years after the critique began, with students of all races drawing on it to express their investment in the relatively new democracy of South Africa, while simultaneously wishing to assert their group identities as Zulu, Xhosa, or whatever they identified with (Kapp & Bangeni, 2011).

The 'rainbow nation' discourse is still in circulation at the time of writing this paper (South African Tourism, 2023).

4. Research methodology

The researcher's plan was to organise five focus groups consisting of six students each. Focus group discussions have the advantage of providing naturalistic data and conversation among participants (Krueger, 2015). Focus groups usually consist of 6 to 12 people who are selected using purposive sampling (Du Plooy, 2009). For this study, non-probability sampling was used, meaning that not all students had an equal chance of being selected for the discussions (Du Plooy, 2009). Instead, participants could be only those students who (a) were in class at the time of this researcher's asking for volunteers; (b) were free and willing to participate on the days of the discussions; and (c) signed up in time to join a group. Smaller groups signed up for the later focus group discussions, and some students did not arrive at all. These smaller group discussions had advantages: it is becoming increasingly popular to conduct research with focus groups comprising only 4 to 6 participants, because they are easier to recruit, easier to host, yield more in-depth insights, and participants find them more comfortable (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

| No. | No. of participants | Level of study | Notes |
|-----|---------------------|--|---|
| 1. | 6 students | 2 nd year | |
| 2. | 1 student | Honours | Chatunga took part in this interview and FGD 4 as well. |
| 3. | 8 students | 2 nd and 3 rd year | |
| 4. | 4 students | Honours | |
| 5. | 2 students | 2 nd year | Adaoha took part in this interview and FGD 7 as well. |
| 6. | 4 students | 3 rd year | |
| 7. | 4 students | 2 nd year | |
| 8. | 3 students | Honours | |

For Interview 2, none of the four students who had signed up for the discussion arrived at all. This is the reason that Chatunga participated twice: he was on campus, willing to take part in Discussion 2, and our one-one-one interview (it now could not be an FGD) was fruitful, if intense. He arrived with three of his classmates for Focus Group

Discussion 4 as well, but the researcher made a quick decision to accept this. Similarly, Adaoha surprisingly arrived to take part in FGD 7 after she had taken part in FGD 5. Both Chatunga and Adaoha are lively, talkative people whose contributions were valuable.

Permission to conduct research was obtained both from the institution and the students themselves. Students were asked to sign consent forms, which made it clear that they had the right to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the FGD process at any stage. To protect the anonymity of students, pseudonyms have been used.

This research was conducted in the institution where this researcher works, and all participants were taught by the researcher. Such 'endogenous research' carries some benefits, such as being able to use Critical Discourse Analysis more easily than an outsider, since one is familiar with the institutional culture (Trowler, 2011). Yet endogenous research can also carry its own ethical risks, such as that of interview bias. It is always easy to assume that what participants say is a direct reflection of their lived experiences (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). However, it was possible that students had preconceived ideas about the researcher's expectations, which might have affected their responses (Trowler, 2011). The ethical implications of interviewing those with less power also had to be considered, because issues of power and status affect all stages of the research process (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013). For instance, in most FGDs, students addressed the researcher as "Ma'am". This respectful form of greeting speaks volumes about the power relationship. The only way to ameliorate this was to try to encourage a friendly, relaxed atmosphere in the FGDs, and to encourage conversation, rather than 'yes/no' answers, in the hope that this would help to counter-balance the power dynamics of the discussion.

Whether to offer incentives or not was another ethical consideration. Some researchers compensate student participants for their time. However, it was decided that 'compensating' the students would take the form of food and drink, following the example of Krueger and Casey (2000).

In the interests of integrity and academic professionalism, care was taken in the way students are represented and quotes were selected carefully to ensure that they were representative of what was said. Such reflexivity and self-awareness can help to minimise some ethical risks, as can stressing the partial and situated nature of research accounts (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). On the other hand, a CR approach does include an acknowledgement of research fallibility (Collier, 1994; Danermark, et al., 1997).

Data from the focus group discussions were analysed, and NVivo software was used to assist in storing and coding this data. The unit of data analysis for spoken text is the *utterance*, generally defined as a stream of speech falling within one intonation contour (from high pitch to low pitch), beginning and ending with a pause, and forming a semantic unit (Crookes, 1990). This unit has been described as the best prospect for second language (SL) discourse analytic purposes (Crookes, 1990). It reflects some of the psychological processes involved in SL language production, as indicated by pauses and intonation, across languages. Following Gee (1999), this researcher used a double slash (//) to indicate final intonation contours. The researcher's own practice was to also use a single slash (/) to indicate a pause, or where a comma would go in ordinary prose, to reinforce this with a line break.

5. Results and discussion

Two Discourses that emerged when discussing learning and using English were the 'Model C was better' Discourse and the 'English to fit in' Discourse. Both are discussed below.

5.1 The 'Model C was better' Discourse

A Discourse about English that became evident almost immediately in the focus group discussions is one that this researcher named the 'Model C was better' Discourse. 'Model C' is the type of schooling in South Africa that is historically advantaged and used to exist mainly for white pupils. It was a form of public schooling that no longer exists. However, these schools are still seen as 'good' schools, charge higher fees, and tend to be well-resourced.

Although the 'Model C was better' Discourse was used in many of the FGDs, it was discussed the most in the first FGD. As this FGD got underway, it quickly became clear that students themselves associate the issue of poor English language acquisition with non-Model C schooling (as it used to be). *They* therefore view both poor language abilities and problematic schooling as constraining mechanisms on their academic and leisure reading practices. This is part of a powerful discourse which maintains that language ability and reading are all that students need to decode concepts and succeed (McKenna, 2004). Much of the first FGD could be viewed as part of a "Big 'C' Conversation" (referred to above) between Discourses centring on class, poverty and how to succeed in higher education in South Africa. Students drew on the dominant discourse of language proficiency as being surface level correctness and mastery of the grammar, which they regard as being taught well at ex-Model C schools, rather than

seeing such correctness and mastery as a powerful practice tied up with issues of wealth, race and class.

For instance, in the first FGD, Nceba (all names are pseudonyms) explained the difference between her schooling and that of 'Model C' schooling in this way:

And I think /
 for, for, for people who studied in like Model C schools/
 I think for them it becomes an advantage in terms of/
 knowing/
 like, words?/
 like sometimes, in a test, there'll be like a word?//
 And then, like, you have to define this word?//
 And if you were not taught that word/
 you'll not know it//
 But I think to THEM/
 it's like/
 they were actually [p] TRAINED?//
 to – to –to – to THINK/
 okay and to combine English words/
 cause some big words are made of small words//

The question marks in the above extract were inserted to indicate the student's uprisings in intonation, which made many of her statements sound like rhetorical questions. Given the content of what she says here, it is possible to surmise that her questioning tone, along with her pauses, hesitations, and very frequent use of 'like' is at least partly the result of her uncertainty about expressing herself in English. Here the student constructs those with a 'Model C' background as being advantaged because, she says, they have a more extensive vocabulary, which is part of "being trained to think" in a certain way. By implication, Nceba is claiming that she was not taught "to think" in a particular way, which has left her struggling to read academic texts. However, it could be that language learning strategies – such as using a dictionary, or semantic mapping – are not all that this student needed. For a start, practising English requires access to networks of people who speak English (Norton, 2013). Over and above language issues, poor and educationally disadvantaged students are particularly likely to experience adjustment difficulties (that is, feel overloaded and stressed) when making the transition from high school to university (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009), suggesting that what Nceba felt she lacked might well have been broader than language learning strategies. Universities need to develop in students the ability to critique the societies in which they live, and to create new forms of knowledge (Wals & Jickling, 2002). This kind of broad thinking, which often requires engagement with issues of power, among others, is an approach that should begin at school, but it can be difficult for pupils to access such knowledge when they are struggling to acquire language competence in the medium of instruction.

Data analysis in this current study also revealed one of the orientations of difference that both Fairclough (2003) and Gee (2014) set out: rather than smoothing over or bracketing difference, students tended to emphasise difference. In the earlier extract, Nceba constantly refers to people who have attended Model C schools as “them” – sometimes emphasising the word – while contrasting those students with students who had attended non-fee-paying schools, referring to the second group sometimes as “us” and sometimes “you”. Silumko (FGD 1) also pointed out differences:

You see ALL the stuff we learn there in ESP/ [English for Special Purposes]
it's primary school stuff that we, we KNEW//
when WE came here/
we already knew okay this is how this is//
But you find that someone who has never done it before/
and this is the first time they were actually seeing it when they were here//
...And sometimes some of them find it difficult/
And some even FAIL//
ESP//

English for Special Purposes, or ESP, is the name of two first-year modules in the Social Sciences and Humanities faculty. Together the modules make up a skills-based, year-long component of the degree programme, which is aimed at improving English competence. Silumko had himself attended what used to be known as a ‘Model C’ school, so refers to such students as “we”, who knew such “primary school stuff”, versus those who had not attended such a school and so did not have the same competence in English. What is interesting is that he is more tentative in his declarations than Nceba. Those who went to a government school he first describes as “someone”, and later tentatively refers to “sometimes some of them”, perhaps because he is representative of one of the fortunate ex-Model C learners who “already knew” everything that was taught in their English for Special Purposes course. It could be argued that Silumko is positioning himself in several ways: as one who belongs to the group who had the necessary knowledge (as shown by the emphatic repetition of “we knew ... we already knew”); and simultaneously as a spokesperson (“You see ... you find that... some of them find it difficult”) for those who did not receive the required knowledge. It also seems that in using some hedging, tentative pronouns and adverbs (“someone”, “sometimes”, “some”), Silumko is attempting to decrease the significance of the gap between the two groups, even as he explains that while he was part of a group who learnt certain abilities in primary school, others do not manage to acquire these abilities at university level.

The above two extracts perform tasks other than enacting identities and positioning the speakers. Leibowitz, et al. (2007), when studying strategies that South African students use to negotiate difference, found that ‘us’ and ‘them’ was a discourse that students

often used, whether to indicate socio-economic difference or linguistic differences. Gee's (2014) Politics Building tool can be applied to show how words can be used to build or assume what counts as a 'social good': that is, "anything a social group or society takes as a good worth having" (Gee, 2014, p.124). In this case, the 'social good' is 'Model C' schooling, which students perceive as 'good' schooling that has prepared some of them for higher education, as opposed to their own inadequate schooling, which they feel has not.

Sibabalwe (FGD 1) said the following:

Another thing/
 [...] is that, mm, in public schools, you always want to ADAPT to what Model C schools/
 [Nkokheli: Are doing]//
 The way they teach English/
 you want to adapt to the way the accent/
 the way in which we communicate/
 like, like – I can't put into words – like/
 the way we roll the English/
 [Others: Mm; Student 1: The accent]/
 ... the accent ja//
 [Researcher: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm]//
 So we always trying to adapt and trying to keep up/
 [...] And most kids who come from public schools/
 we feel inferior to those who come [Others: Mm; Ja] from Model C schools//
 Cause their English ['is so good' ?inaudible]//

Here Sibabalwe mistakenly groups "those who come from Model C schools" as not being "from public schools", whereas ex-Model C schools were public, not private. This reveals the status that ex-Model C schools have. Sibabalwe's mention of 'adapting' his accent to try to sound like more privileged students who have had better schooling is an illustration of the notion of 'audibility'. Used in this manner, the term 'audibility' was coined by Miller to mean the degree to which speakers sound like, and so are legitimated by, users of the dominant discourse (Miller, 2004). In this way speakers position themselves through their language use, which requires the collaboration of speaker and listener (Miller, 2004). By 'adapting' the researcher assumes he means 'changing'; in other words, he acknowledges that he and others consciously attempt to change the way they speak English, perhaps for reasons of status, as discussed in the literature review above.

It could be surmised that Sibabalwe's allusion in the extract above to those who have had poor schooling working hard "to adapt and ... keep up" is as a result of their perception of the symbolic power attached to not only speaking English, but to speaking it in a particular way. Yet many parents, perceiving English-language education as desirable, enrol their children in schools offering English as the medium of instruction (Broom, 2004).

The above extract shows that in the 'Model C was better' Discourse, students construct 'Model C' schools as places that not only teach learners English language more effectively than "public schools" (that is, government schools), but also teach learners how to talk differently and even think differently, and leave the others behind. Research elsewhere found that students at an historically 'white', largely English-medium South African university who did not speak English as their home language felt judged and stigmatised as 'second-language' speakers (Kapp & Bangeni, 2011), and it seems that similar kinds of judgements (albeit about the *kind* of English spoken) occur at University of Fort Hare.

The second Discourse analysed here revealed other roles that English played in the students' lives.

5.2 'English to fit in' Discourse

One way in which this recognition of language's power played out was when participants talked about how they used a variety of Englishes to 'fit in'. Fadziso's home language is Shona. When I asked her whether coming to University of Fort Hare posed a problem in terms of languages spoken, she said:

It may be because I had conditioned myself/
 knowing that university's just English/
 so [p]/
 I just stayed with English// [Researcher: Right//]
 I never really encountered a problem where a lecturer would speak to me in Xhosa
 [p]/
 no/
 I haven't//
 It's always English//

For Fadziso, a lecturer who spoke to her in isiXhosa would be "a problem", as she did not speak the language fluently. For the many isiXhosa speakers at University of Fort Hare, it would probably not be "a problem" – although whether it would help prepare students for the world of work is another issue. So it was that Fadziso actively worked to master English, to 'fit in' with what she perceived as the campus norm.

Some South African students use another kind of English, known as Urban English, which is a mixture of English, Afrikaans, Kwaito-influenced slang (Kwaito is a local music form), and isiXhosa, suggesting that it is a way of connecting across linguistic and class differences, as well as a way of using English while signalling Africanness (Kapp and Bangeni, 2011). Chatunga told me that Urban English “began when the black community was beginning to differentiate themselves from the rest, and tried to create a certain language code so that nobody could understand them”. (This is not a completely accurate depiction of the start of what has become known as Urban AAVE, or African American Vernacular English, as described by Edwards, 2004.)

However, the students who participated in the discussions see Urban English as a mixture of Americanisms and English slang words, rather than an affirmation of Africanness or blackness. Fadziso first mentioned Urban English as being “this Urban English that they use now [...] I’m too old for that”, with Chatunga going on to explain that it is a kind of English that originated in the United States and is now used “worldwide ... globally”. Lulama (FGD 5) explained how it began with expressions like, “I’m *gonna* do this; I *wanna* do this”, and abbreviations used when sending text messages via cell phones.

Adaoha (FDG 5) is Nigerian and cannot speak isiXhosa, which frequently marks her as an outsider on her campus. She explained how she struggled to find fellow students with whom she had something in common, so she makes sure that the English she speaks enables her to “actually fit in”:

I use them [Urban English words]//
 As much as I do use them/
 When you’re in a society where everyone uses them/
 You just feel like you/
 you know/
 wanna be involved// [...]
 Maybe when you’re around your friends/
 Your peers/
 and I can actually fit in/
 and speak those words//
 But when I leave there/
 It lives there/
 And it stays right there//
 But when I go back to my mama/
 I gotta speak the right thing!//
 [Everyone laughs]

A ‘social language’ is a style of speaking or writing associated with a particular identity (Gee, 2011, p. 212). Adaoha’s remarks here show how adept she is at using social language varieties. In the extract above, Adaoha discusses how she uses different

varieties of English to suit her context, and so has ‘figured it out’, as the title of this paper suggests. In this way Adaoha is “making visible and recognisable ... different versions of *who* she is and *what* she is doing” (Gee, 2011, p. 48). Similarly, Canagarajah (2013), points out that English, like all languages and forms of communication, are used by speakers to negotiate difference and be understood.

Students’ bilingualism or multilingualism brings advantages and richness, but in higher education in a country that fails to recognise and develop all languages, can be challenging (Van Pletzen, 2006, p. 117). Some participants recounted the details of their multilingual backgrounds. Several students spoke of how they had moved from place to place as children, found themselves in areas where their home languages were not spoken, and so had to adapt by learning new languages, or become more proficient in English. Chatunga, for example, is a Zimbabwean who told me that his home language is Shona. However:

There’s this thing growing up where [p]/
I used to travel a lot/
around the world with my parents//
So, basically, the language we used the most was English//
[And at my pre-school] we were blacks, coloureds, Indians/
there were a whole lot of diverse groups so/
it was strictly English to accommodate everybody//

In Chatunga’s experience, then, the ‘English to fit in’ Discourse was a norm. However, unlike Fadziso, he found that his English proficiency was of little use when he arrived on campus at University of Fort Hare and wanted to interact with peers:

Well that,/
that was/
it was/
I think it was one of the biggest culture shocks I had in my LIFE//
I met people who couldn’t speak English AT ALL//
[...] and I remember like when I was an undergrad/
first year, second year/
my roommate/
when he came through/
he couldn’t speak English at all//
Because he was saying where he learnt [at school]/
at times even during Maths or English class/
the teacher would teach them the language in Xhosa//

Chatunga’s description of the enormous “culture shock” he experienced at first is an indication of the class and linguistic differences that exist between middle-class

students and working-class students at University of Fort Hare and, presumably, at any South African university. Although there are no official tallies, anecdotal evidence suggests to me that the Zimbabwean students who attend University of Fort Hare tend to comprise more middle-class students than their South African classmates do. For the above reasons, it could be that Zimbabwean Chatunga's "culture shock" was more akin to a "class shock" as he met students for the first time who had emerged from rural schools in South Africa.

Chatunga went on to say that because English was not as widespread as he expected at University of Fort Hare, he learnt to speak isiXhosa ("I had to adjust and learn the Xhosa language within a couple of months"). Here the 'English to fit in' Discourse became the 'isiXhosa to fit in' discourse. Although nobody said, "I feel it's important to speak many languages", there was a sense of quiet pride that was evident (no doubt encouraged by this researcher's positive reaction) when students told me that they spoke a number of languages.

For instance, Khanyiswa (FGD 3) told of how she spoke Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa at home. The texts she read were in English and isiXhosa:

My family's Coloured so we used to speak a lot of Afrikaans/
and my grandmother/
my mother's mother/
is Xhosa//
so/
for her/
she used to go to a Xhosa church so/
when we used to go/
we used to go to church we used to read in Xhosa/
like, we read the Bible in Xhosa/ [Researcher: Ja, ja]
but at school I'm reading in English/
and then at home I'm reading in Xhosa//
But there was like a whole amalgamation of all three languages/
all at the same time/
for me//

This is an example of a participant drawing on a socially recognised identity to refer to a Figured World, which is a feature of Gee's (2014) Critical Discourse Analysis: a varying, simplified representation of what is regarded as typical or normal. In this case, the student's stated identity is that of a South African "Coloured" (so-called mixed-race) person. Wicomb (1998) notes that that the term 'coloured' has difficulty in attaining a fixed meaning. The term Coloured, with a capital 'C', and without the old 'so-called' preceding it, reappeared in the 1990s (Wicomb, 1998). Bosch (2008)

describes “Coloured” identity as being complex, fluid and problematic. While some refute the term “as being an artificial one imposed on them by the apartheid state ... and prefer to self-identify as black”, others happily identify themselves as Coloured (Bosch, 2008, p. 188), as Khanyiswa does.

The Figured World that Khanyiswa then draws on is one that many South Africans would recognise: that “Coloured” South Africans tend to speak Afrikaans as their home language (Bosch, 2008). Khanyiswa goes one step further, implying that to be “Coloured” *is* to speak Afrikaans. Khanyiswa’s use of the conjunction “so” in “My family’s Coloured **so** we used to speak a lot of Afrikaans” strongly links ‘Coloured-ness’ with the speaking of that language, making Afrikaans an intrinsic part of her identity. However, to equate Afrikaans with ‘Coloured-ness’ is problematic, for in some communities, English was more highly valued (McCormick, 2002, in Devarenne, 2010) and the assumption that all “Coloured” people speak Afrikaans is incorrect. Wicomb (1998) points to the blurring of any differences in language, class and religion in “Coloured” communities, is “in the interest of a homogenous ethnic group” (p. 94), and it could be argued that Khanyiswa’s blithe statement could be a result of this blurring of difference. The more general point to be made here, though, is that it is difficult to make even the most seemingly straightforward statement about language in South Africa without (even unconsciously) revealing things about one’s attitudes to race, power, history and identity.

Nomlanga is an older student. She found that moving around to live in various parts of the country while she was growing up, along with the requirements of the South African school system at the time, had an impact on her linguistic abilities:

I speak Zulu/
I speak Xhosa// [coughs]
I speak Sotho// [coughs]
and Tswana/ [Researcher: Phew!]
and English//
and a bit of Afrikaans/

Yet celebrating diversity without paying attention to relations of power means the ‘standard’ becomes the norm (Janks, 2010), and such students indicated that their exposure to multilingual environments led to their adopting English as the lingua franca in several contexts, University of Fort Hare being one of them. So perhaps the hegemonic power of English, perversely, is an enabling mechanism for some. For according to the students’ accounts in my study, these multilingual environments of the past, while often not conducive to achieving literacy in an African language, sometimes contributed to encouraging them to achieve proficiency in English. For example,

Chatunga said that one of the schools he attended “there were a whole lot of diverse groups, so it was strictly English to accommodate everybody”; and when Fadziso, whose home language is Shona, was asked whether coming to University of Fort Hare posed a problem in terms of languages spoken, she said: “It may be because I had conditioned myself, knowing that university’s just English, so I just stayed with English.”

This is a weighty issue: entire books have been published in South Africa devoted to studying the challenges facing multilingual South African children as they make their way through the schooling system (for example, Weideman, Read & Du Plessis, 2021). It could be argued, though, that for a few participants, there seemed to be a chain of circumstances which meant that multilingualism, *for them*, helped to enable their academic literacy practices.

6. Conclusion

During focus group discussions, participants tended to link English language issues to the quality of school education that they had received. So it was that ‘Model C was better’ was a prominent Discourse across most of the focus group discussions – even though ‘Model C’ schooling does not officially exist any longer. The implicit feature of this Discourse is the notion of some kind of educational deficit which, while not new, is dismaying to find so many years after democracy.

While the ‘Model C was better’ is a Discourse that could be labelled as negative, implying as it does that only some students have much of a chance in succeeding at university, the ‘English to fit in’ Discourse was supported by a more positive spirit. Here students showed how they could use their agency in making use of various kinds of English to fit in with their peers. As they did so, they revealed a certain pride in their identity as Africans who were negotiating social and academic spaces.

New Literacy Studies practitioners maintain that acquiring academic literacy skills is only part of the story of becoming academically literate. Students need to acquire an identity of the successful student, for instance. For this reason, it is to be hoped that lecturers who work with students in improving their academic literacy could further uncover, expose and gradually reduce (if not demolish) such negative Discourses as ‘Model C was better’, while highlighting and building on the power and skills that students already possess, as shown in ‘English to fit in’.

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