LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION: A CRITICAL ASPECT OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

N. Xulu-Gama
Department of Sociology
University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6944-5783

S. Hadebe
Department of Sociology
Rhodes University
Makhanda, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The article discusses language as a critical aspect of epistemological access to higher education in South Africa through a critical analysis of students' views on language preferences and attitudes at Durban University of Technology (DUT). Language of instruction at higher education institutions is one amongst a plethora of challenges faced in providing equity in higher education in a socially divided post-apartheid South Africa. This discussion of language and access takes place within broader epistemological access challenges faced in South African higher education. The data generated by 45 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students from six faculties was collected as part of an institution-wide "Who are our students?" research project. The phenomenological thematic analysis arose from the three research questions asked: what is your home language and what language would you prefer to be taught in and why? Some students did not provide an explanation for their choice as they felt it was self-evident, while some provided interesting reasons for their choices. A critical analysis of the findings using Morrow's epistemological access theory is conducted against the backdrop of the context of English dominance over indigenous languages; the history of South African higher education, current DUT and higher education policy as it pertains to language and the subsequent challenges around equitable access.

Keywords: language of instruction, epistemological access, higher education, undergraduate students, success

INTRODUCTION

"The legacy of Apartheid and the dominance of western literacy practices in South Africa's higher education mean that our students may not have easy access to the linguistic codes or cultural practices of the academic communities ... there is frequently a significant difference between the

literacy practices of our students' homes and those expected of them at [higher education institutions]." (McKenna 2004, 274).

This article discusses the difficult position that students find themselves in when they do not have easy access to the linguistic codes or cultural practices of the academic institution. These codes and practices are usually different to those that students use at home or in their high schools. While language and education in the South African context has generally received scholarly attention (see Msimang 1992; Leibowitz 1997; De Klerk 2000; Madiba 2004; Mesthrie 2009; Nudelman 2015), the linguistic-related problems in education persist unabated. These problems continue to thwart policies meant to uplift previously marginalized people. Forging equity and equality in education and expanding access to tertiary education are some of the processes in place to achieve education for all, among other policy measures. However, the effort to uplift the previously marginalised majority will need to go beyond policy to interrogate the knowledge, cultural practices and education content of pedagogical issues.

It is against the aforementioned background that this article emerged from a research project dealing with issues of student success and access, student centeredness and engagement. The article's scope, however, limits itself to access to appropriate linguistic codes, drawing from Morrow's (2009) epistemological access theory and the language attitudes of undergraduate students. The key question that we focused on was: "What language do you prefer to be taught in and why?" Through using interviews of undergraduate students' attitudes and language preferences at Durban University of Technology (DUT), in KwaZulu Natal, this article attempts a qualitative analysis of issues of access and language in South Africa's higher education. The reason we have decided to limit our focus to issues of language and access is because language has an impact on students' success, as has been seen by scholars who research students' access and success (Jama, Mapasela, and Beyleveld 2008; Jones et al. 2008; Maphosa et al. 2014; Sosibo and Katiya 2015; Manik 2015). Additionally, Du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) argued that epistemological access in a South African context remains under-researched. Epistemological access concerns itself with educational outcomes and ways of keeping the individual enrolled and ensuring good quality education (Du Plooy and Zilindile 2014), which we argue in this article is strongly associated with the language used as a medium of instruction. In this article we argue that language of instruction plays a critical role in the epistemological access process, which impacts on the success (or lack of success) of the students at the institutions of higher education. By looking at the attitudes of undergraduate students at DUT, we provide an important, often-neglected background to the dominance of English over African languages. We argue that students' language preferences and attitudes should not be taken for

granted, and most importantly they should not be understood outside of the historical context of the country and the continent.

CONTEXTUALISING LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND ACCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The post-colonial language debate in Africa in general exhibits the dichotomy between the efficacy of mother-tongue (local) language of instruction and the continued dominance of the colonial language. While common sense and scientific evidence overwhelmingly support mother-tongue as language of instruction (Prah 1995; Brock-Utne 2000; 2001; Alexander 2002; 2003; Qorro 2009), in reality, the opposite has been the trend almost throughout post-colonial Africa. Indeed, the language of instruction debate is intricately entwined with democracy itself, as argued by Alidou and Mazrui:

> "Can there be genuine democracy in South Africa when prevailing post-apartheid institutions continue to foster forms of knowledge that continue to produce inequalities which continue to underprivilege the African majority?" (Alidou and Mazrui 1999, 101).

To a large extent, these forms of knowledge that Alidou and Mazrui (1999) refer to derive from middle class European culture and traditions that are alien to the majority of working class African students. English linguistic imperialism has been pervasive in the contemporary post-colonial order (see Phillipson 1992). As has been observed by many writers, including Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994) and Alexander (2002), English is clearly a hegemonic language in the contemporary world partly as a historical legacy of the British Empire and the political, military and economic dominance of the United States of America. Local communities that aspire to proficiency and fluency in English do so unconscious of the ideological forces behind the linguistic imperialism of English and its marginalisation of local languages such as *isi*Zulu. Notwithstanding the numerical superiority of *isi*Zulu over both English and Afrikaans when compared in terms of the number of mother tongue speakers in South Africa (Webb 1996, 143–144), *isi*Zulu still ranks lower than English, because it is subjected to English dominance in several domains. Due to the ideological dominance, communities aspiring to English create beliefs to rationalize their behaviours.

CONTEXTUALISING EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Notably, Tinto (2002), Prinsloo (2009) and Manik (2015) have all reiterated the importance of addressing student success and access issues within an institution-specific context. This is

against the backdrop of a high dropout rate in South Africa's higher education institutions (see Motala 2017), where barely half of the admitted students complete their degree programmes. While there could be an interplay of multiple factors to account for this failure rate, we posit that the language of instruction may be one such hurdle.

Although the Department of Higher Education and Training made it a point to encourage and support initiatives to widen access for previously disadvantaged students, with a special focus on Black South Africans, the results remain discomforting. For example, cohort studies (CHE 2013, 15) show that, of the students entering a three-year degree, less than half complete, and of those who do, up to 50 per cent take as many as six years to graduate. One in four students (excluding those at UNISA) drops out before the second year of study. Only 35 per cent of the total intake, and 48 per cent of contact students, graduate within five years (Motala 2017, 17). Since the poor output rate continues in spite of financial support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this may point to deeper learning challenges than just financial and material support.

Furthermore, the dropout rate of Black students is relatively higher than that of either Indian or White students. This becomes of interest to this study, considering that, normally, Indian and White students in South Africa have English as their home language, or, if not, their proficiency in it is at mother tongue level. Various factors could account for these high dropout rates and delays in completion of studies, as well as the racially differentiated performance indices. According to Manik (2015, 230) overall the higher education system still reflects the legacy of apartheid when it comes to participation by "race" group and socio-economic status, and when it comes to who among these students finish their degrees on time and with good marks. It is against some of these glaring disparities that epistemological access issues help account for the low performance of students from previously marginalized groups.

There are two dimensions of access to higher education. The first is physical or formal (institutional) access, which entails qualifying to get a space, having a way of getting to the institution through applications, and having funding to register and pay for tuition after getting a space. The second, and perhaps less clearly defined, is epistemological (expanded) access, which is access to the knowledge that institution distributes (Du Plooy and Zilindile 2014, 194). It can be understood as being able to engage with the content offered by the institution. "Epistemological access is learning how to be a successful participant in an academic practice" (Morrow 2009, 78, in Du Plooy and Zilindile 2014, 195). Morrow (2009, 78, in Du Plooy and Zilindile 2014, 195) argues that people come from different backgrounds, and having certain resources can facilitate one's epistemological access, but it still does not guarantee it. Gamede (2005, 4) defines access inclusively, meaning "both the means of entry, which is the first step,

and post-enrolment access that is reflected in the outcomes".

Morrow (2007) argues that epistemological access was borne out of the need to democratise access to higher education. Democratic access is particularly pertinent to the South African context, considering the history of legislated racial inequality and segregation. The reason epistemological access has become a big issue in South Africa is because, after apartheid ended, the higher education institutions had to start opening doors to people who obviously were never trained in the culture and the language(s) that were the norm in the higher education institutions. The weakness in Morrow's definition of epistemological access is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure whether it has been attained. However, measurement is not important for this study, as it is qualitative and exploratory; experiences and attitudes of undergraduate students are what is important.

DUT has made significant strides in increasing representation of previously disadvantaged and marginalised members of society. Actually, DUT's language policy claims to promote multilingualism while at the same time insisting that "DUT will maintain English as the main medium of instruction" (DUT 2010, 2). In essence, the policy promotes the dominance of English in the multilingual environment that the policy aptly recognizes.

Despite the rising number of African participants in higher education institutions, Manik (2015) cautions that it is still miniscule when comparing with Indian and White students. Black students have to study in a language that is not their first language; some, especially rural students, might have not previously experienced it fully even in high school, and sometimes, being the first generation in their families and perhaps even in their communities to enter higher education makes it even more of a challenge to use English for academic purposes at higher education institutions (Jones et al. 2008; Manik 2015).

Lotz-Sisitka (2009) argues that the language of instruction could be one issue among many which influence the way teaching practices are constraining and enabling epistemological access in South Africa. It is imperative for higher education institutions to either adapt their teaching approaches or create appropriate and improved pedagogies suitable for the majority of Black South African students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Inadequate preparation for the academic demands and poor matching of courses (Beck 2011; Manik 2014) are amongst the broader epistemological factors. Xulu-Gama et al. (2018) noted that most students were not registered in their first-choice degree programmes. These factors have been seen to have an impact on the access and success of the undergraduate students.

The fact that only 28 per cent of students in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme of South Africa make it to graduation implies that there are hindrances to students' success in institutions other than the funding problem (Govender 2013). "The implication here is that

measures to financially support students are insufficient in propelling them to achieve success and that additional measures need to be institutionalized, factoring in the impact of educational history" (Manik 2015, 231). In our view, that additional measure includes enhancing epistemological access in South Africa's higher education institutions.

Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) state that factors influencing access and success at university are complex and multidimensional. Some of the social factors include schooling background, socio-economic status, race, gender and the social context of learning. Some of the academic factors include pedagogy, language and literacy, teaching and assessment practices and curriculum structure. However, the historical basis of these impediments was succinctly spelt out by Morrow (2007) when he alluded to the fact that Apartheid education generated what he termed "epistemological deprivation", meaning that formal education under Apartheid denied Blacks the knowledge normally gained in schools. He further argued, and rightfully so, that enrolment and admission into institutions of higher education are in themselves not a sufficient condition for equity and equal opportunities unless epistemological access is enabled.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 DUT undergraduate students across different campuses, with the aim of finding out students' language of instruction preferences. This was done against the backdrop of the home languages of the students. Language, and the successful use of linguistic codes, is an important part of the process of accessing the content that students come to the university to be taught about and trained in. Each interview lasted anything from 10 to 30 minutes, with the broader focus being success and access, student centredness and student engagement. Interviews were conducted in English and *isi*Zulu, depending on the language that the student was comfortable with. Both languages were sometimes used interchangeably by both the interviewer and the interviewees. The data was then transcribed and translated by the research team and quality control was ensured.

This study adhered to social science ethical considerations which includes getting informed consent; letting participants know at they could withdraw from the research process anytime; causing no harm to participants; maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. The ethical clearance was sought and obtained from DUT ethical clearance committee.

Some of the benefits of conducting face to face interviews is that they give the interviewer a chance to observe the body language of the interviewee. For example, when some students thought some answers to the interview questions were self-evident, face to face interviews helped because the researcher could observe the students rolling their eyes and shrugging their shoulders, and was able to further enquire about the meaning of such expressions.

Upon analysing data, it became apparent that our lack of prescription on what we meant by home language allowed students to respond in different ways to this question, according to their understanding of home language. For most of the students, it meant mother-tongue; sometimes it meant any other language spoken at home. Asking these specific questions on language allowed us to move away from assumptions and generalisations based on observations or even our experiences as teachers (academic staff members). The findings of this research will hopefully allow DUT to zoom in on what is logical and implementable in this context to make students' success and access a lived reality for all students.

FINDINGS

When asked: "What language do you prefer to be taught in and why?" two students out of 45, who were *isi*Zulu speakers, said they preferred to be taught in *isi*Zulu. They justified their preference by saying that *isi*Zulu is their home language and they understood it better than any other language. Another two out of 45, also *isi*Zulu speakers, said they preferred to be taught in English and the reasons were that English was a general and common language used at the university. Further, they mentioned that most of their lecturers did not speak African languages.

An additional two out of 45, who were *isi*Xhosa speakers, preferred to be taught in English because, even when they were at their homes, they often spoke in English, and they perceived English as a standard language.

One student who was an *isi*Zulu speaker preferred to be taught in English because he felt that when he finished studying at university, he would still need English (as a tool and resource) when he went to look for employment. Residing in a township, he felt that he spoke enough *isi*Zulu at home and in his community.

Meanwhile, a student whose mother tongue was English said he preferred to be taught in English because that was the only language that he understood well, but he felt it was important to mention that he was in the process of learning *isi*Zulu.

Yet another *isi*Zulu speaking student also preferred to be taught in English. His reason was that at school they were taught in English, so that made it easier for him to continue in English. He said that English also made it easier for him to communicate with other students at the university students' residence. On the same note, another two students who were *isi*Zulu speakers said that they preferred to be taught in English because they had been taught in English for the whole of their lives and were comfortable with that.

Our findings show a general preference for English by students regardless of the fact that the majority did not speak the language at home and that it was not their mother tongue. Some of the reasons which were given by these students to justify their preference for English were

as follows:

i)   Because it is a common language

ii)   Because it is the main medium of communication

iii) Because most people understand it better than any other language

iv)   Because there is an assumption that everyone knows English.

One student whose mother tongue was not English said her language preference would be English because English was the main medium of instruction in this country, "especially since we have different races, so English would be one language that we all understand".

Another student who has English as a mother tongue preferred to be taught in English and this was because she said she didn't know any other language, and she also said that English was a basic language that everybody needs to know.

A student who has English as a mother tongue said she preferred to be taught in English, but sometimes had fun when the lecturer spoke other languages such as *isi*Zulu because she learned new words.

One student, when asked what their home language was, said English and *isi*Xhosa and another student answered *isi*Zulu and a bit of English. One student, when asked what language she would like to be taught in, gave a long answer, saying: "Obviously it's always easy to be taught in your home language [mother tongue] because you understand easily and you can learn faster because you understand. But you have to think for the other students as well because English is the only language that is fair." Her home language is *isi*Zulu. In another part of the interview, the same student said:

> "I don't want to say I don't like computers, ... mmm it's just that I was not exposed to them at school. Sometimes I get confused because there are a whole lot of ways to log in. Maybe if there was a same password and username I would know. But now I get confused because at the library there is a different login and it's so hard. But usually I am the type that prefers someone to give me notes and then I can refer to my notes. But I am learning something new."

In the response cited above, the student revealed some challenges regarding academic and technical terminology that must be acquired if one is to access knowledge in the various disciplines. The general university systems, including libraries, are increasingly being based on information communication technologies (ICT) which appear to be a serious challenge or burden to some students and likely a hurdle to their learning.

The mention of the computers (ICT) and related challenges encountered by students, especially the previously disadvantaged (not previously exposed to the world of ICT) is very

symbolic, and metaphoric for what we discuss in this article. The additional difficulties brought about by the confrontation with the unknown world can be seen as a metaphor for language which affects epistemological access.

A Fine Arts student, when asked what his home language is, said, "I speak English, I also speak Afrikaans and I have been exposed to speaking *isi*Zulu. However, I prefer to be taught in English. But I would also like to expand my thinking and understanding and exploring other languages, especially international languages like French, because of the knowledge we gain from countries such as France. France plays a big role in arts." It would seem that, while non-English speaking students would prefer English as language of instruction, those whose home language is English do not think of *isi*Zulu as a possible option for the language of instruction.

Understandably, an international student said that he preferred to be taught in English, since he did not speak any local languages. He also expressed that he gets confused when the lecturers sometime address the class in *isi*Zulu. He would prefer that only English is used in class for teaching and learning purposes. Indeed, South Africa may need to explore ways of catering for international students should indigenous languages win the battle for language of instruction in tertiary education. This should not be a problem at all as universities worldwide take international students and either start them with language courses or have courses in an international language. Universities continue to seek international students since they come with funding.

DISCUSSION: LANGUAGE ATTITUDES BY STUDENTS

This research has presented interesting and diverse findings on the students' language preferences for teaching and learning purposes at the university. Students' preference for English reflects a positive attitude towards English as the most suitable language of instruction. The majority of the students interviewed for this research mentioned English as a preferred language to be taught in, regardless of having English as an additional language and of the challenges that they encounter in accessing knowledge in English. However, what was even more interesting were the various reasons that the majority of undergraduate students interviewed preferred English over other languages, particularly over their home languages, for those who were indigenous language speakers.

It is not all the students interviewed who were interested in substantiating why they preferred English as a medium of instruction at this particular university, as almost a half did not. However, for those who did give an answer, most of the English language speakers said that it is because English is the only language that they knew, as has been shown above. Sometimes when students were asked what languages they preferred to be taught in, the

researchers received looks which implied that the question asked was too obvious – "*like, duh*"[1] – and when the researchers enquired further what that meant, then the student would go on to say "English, of course". The responses given by mother-tongue *isi*Zulu language speakers preferring to be taught in English clearly indicate that the choice is made under constrained circumstances. Students perceive that if they do not choose English now, they will somehow suffer later, because in the workplace they will be expected to be fluent in verbal and written English communication. Perhaps students were confirming the dominance of English as noted by Fairclough (2001), where he aptly observed that questions of language are questions of power. Since language-use mirrors the state of a particular society, those who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to have their languages dominated, and the case of *isi*Zulu is no different.

In this case it was concerning, although understandable (considering the colonial historical context), that students did not question the use of English as the first choice of the university. It was also quite unfortunate that students were speaking about issues of "fairness" and "thinking for others" over themselves – over their own needs, challenges and personal preferences. Actually the question of who determines "fairness" may need interrogation as well, as it reflects the hegemony of the dominant culture when an *isi*Zulu first language speaker talks about it being fair to be taught in English in order to accommodate other students while an *isi*Zulu speaker represents the majority of students at DUT, in terms of mother tongue languages spoken. Who determines what is fair? How is fairness determined in this case? The previous White privilege is a critical historical framework which is unfortunately still very much with us in the post democratic era. It helps us explain why White students should be given priority in terms of language, which somehow indicates the power that they still hold over Black students in painfully silent ways.

The response of the isiZulu speaker is contradicted by a response from a first-language English speaker, who prefers to be taught in English because that is the language that every student should learn, know and be taught in. These sentiments still reflect the dominant ideas and positioning of people with English as a first language over those who use English as an additional language. The pathologizing of students that Heymann and Carolissen (2011) referred to can be seen in the reaction of *isi*Zulu speaking students thinking and feeling that it is not fair for them (as the majority of students in class) to be taught in their home language, because perhaps there are a few other students who do not speak their home language. But it is not seen as unfair for the *isi*Zulu speakers to be subjected to the English language, no matter how great the difficulties they encounter in the process of learning English and learning in English. This would be different if English were to be taught to and used as a second language

for non-English speakers such as the majority of students at DUT.

There was another group of students, *isi*Xhosa and *isi*Zulu language speakers, who still preferred to be taught in English because, they argued, they were taught in English in school, and therefore it was easier for them to continue being taught in that language. Such attitudes are understandable and even expected from undergraduate students who anyway have had English as the medium of instruction from primary school through to high school. These attitudes are prevalent in society as parents themselves perceive English as the language that could open better opportunities for their children and hence exert pressure on both students and teachers to invest more time and effort in English as a language. By implication, the overemphasis on English means undervaluing other mother tongues, be it *isi*Zulu, *isi*Xhosa or any other local language. Language beliefs are largely influenced by the values and beliefs of a community. Accordingly, for most African countries it is European languages, especially English, that dominate due to prestige and elitist language policies. Having a certain level of language proficiency is required in higher education. Unfortunately "African languages do not have histories as academic languages in higher education" (Mkhize and Balfour 2017, 134), and not enough has been done to change that.

The experiences of some students can be explained as plagued with foreign words that have little or no meaning to them. This is perhaps similar to the experiences of the students who have a problem with the ICT language and the technicalities of it. These concepts that are inaccessible to students largely owing to linguistic barriers curtail their knowledge acquisition regardless of their intellectual capabilities. In a related debate, McKenna (2004, 274) quotes a participant from her study who notes that "language at the [university] was so jigglish, even though it is English, it is so jigglish ... like a professor wrote it". Few students are coping with university language, especially those who have to use a foreign language.

In the cases of the students who said that there is no option of choosing to be taught in an African language because their lecturers do not speak their home languages, "[i]t might be surmised that the [lecturers] concerned have not developed adequate abilities or do not have appropriate conditions available to enable epistemological access" (Lotz-Sisitka 2009, 67).

We have to note that being taught in one's home language does indeed facilitate an easier and faster learning process, as outlined by one of the students above. It is worth emphasising that English speakers, whether they be White, Indian, Coloured or Black, are privileged in comparison to the *isi*Zulu and *isi*Xhosa speakers. "[We are] ... not suggesting that the literacy practices with which middle class, English speaking [students] are familiar from their home and school are identical to those of [the] higher education environment. Each discipline has its own norms and values, manifested in its own range of literary practice" (McKenna 2004, 276).

The situation is therefore even more complicated for learners from *isi*Zulu homes where English is the language of instruction. We also concur with Morrow (2009) that, although having certain resources such as mother tongue as a language of instruction in higher education can facilitate one's epistemological access, it does not guarantee it.

It is also important to mention that students' experiences of English as a language of instruction are multiple, complex and fluid. Many Black African students never make it to graduation day, and this is not because they do not have the desire to succeed. Learning is not a skill acquired through a desire to succeed and practise, but involves complex social interactions and power differentials that engage the identities of the learners (McKenna 2014, 273).

While the few international students complained that they felt isolated when lecturers spoke in *isi*Zulu, McKenna (2014), on the other hand, commended *isi*Zulu speaking lecturer who used formally uneducated *isi*Zulu speaking experts who would come to class and speak in their home language for the majority of the previously disadvantaged *isi*Zulu speaking students. The lecturer asked one of the students in class to translate to the rest of the class. McKenna (2004, 277) argued that this "was the only lecturer who expressed an understanding of the extent to which taking on the ways being demanded by his discipline, had an impact on students' identities". While that could be the case, we have noted previously that using a home language on its own is not a sufficient condition for epistemological access.

Reinforcing the attitudes to language and language choices are problems salient to language corpus planning, namely elaboration of grammar, terminology development, language standardization and orthography issues. It becomes clear that in the South African context, the problem is not necessarily granting status to African languages – which the constitution already has – but language cultivation issues. As long as African languages are perceived as limited in handling specialized fields, they will be further marginalized in the education system. Ironically, unless the same languages are used in education as languages of instruction, these African languages will not develop the necessary terminology and elaboration appropriate for academic purposes. Therefore, the negative attitudes towards African languages as medium of instruction deny the same languages opportunities to develop relevant capacities and thereby deny them space in the education system.

In a similar study, Conduah (2003), researching the University of Witwatersrand community but closely linking issues of identity and introduction of an African language at university, found sentiments relevant to what we found in our study. For example, he found that 44 per cent felt that using both English and an African language for instruction could improve academic progress for students. He also found that 42 per cent of his sample disagreed

with adding an African language as a medium of instruction, 34 per cent agreed and 24 per cent were neutral. From the narratives of the Wits sample, students also used words like *just* and *right* to express issues of fairness in using English as a language of instruction. Students also mentioned anxiety around the language demands and expectations of the world of work. He concluded that students find themselves in complex positions and having competing views on issues of language preferences at higher education institutions.

Mkhize and Balfour (2017) argue that the absence of commitment from the universities to fully incorporate African languages as languages of instruction results in the violation of the language rights of African language speaking students and continues to promote segregationist ideologies. They conclude that commitment to developing African languages as a viable means to academic success in higher education remains compelling.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this study in higher education in Africa are that while the dominance of European languages in HEIs has its merits, it also has its challenges for the African continent. This study has shown the intricacy of language usage when it comes to higher education. What has become apparent is that students are influenced not only by their personal historical positionalities but their global aspirations and the need to connect across the borders. Prioritising only European languages in higher education in Africa denies access to students as they are discouraged to engage in their languages. This also hinders the growth in the development of African languages as there are already many theoretical and conceptual tools which are used in English and in academia which do not have translations in African languages.

Underlying language attitudes are the ideological forces that promote the hegemony of English worldwide in general and in former British colonies in particular. Jussawalla and Dasenbrock (1992) observed that "African thought is imprisoned in foreign languages", in reference to African writers' choice of European languages barely understood by 80 per cent of their populations. The choice of English has sustained the positive attitudes that some indigenous people have towards the English language which they hold high, to the detriment of their own languages. English is perceived as the language of socio-economic upward mobility and a signifier of modernity, development and globalisation.

The intention of this research was to look at the language of instruction as either a facilitating or hindering factor for epistemological access of undergraduate students at DUT. From a number of ways in which students experience access and success, language became a strand to be further examined because of the baggage, which is impossible to ignore or bypass, that it carries from a colonial and apartheid historical point of view of higher education in South

Africa. This study has unearthed interesting responses from the undergraduate students on issues of language preferences at the university. The students' responses confirm the ideological underpinning of language attitudes and internalisation of English dominance in the context of post-colonial societies.

Language remains central in addressing epistemological access issues in South African higher education in general and at DUT in particular. It is time the institution undergoes a "radical linguistic transformation" (see Webb, Lafon, and Pare 2010) as an indispensable aspect of attaining equity in education in South Africa. While technical aspects of language development such as intellectualisation are crucial interventions, it is equally important to attend to language attitudes of students, parents and teaching staff. Also, for higher education to play its transformative role in South Africa, policy needs to be adjusted further, and a total mindset shift is needed towards content production and the role of indigenous South African languages as languages of instruction.

To address the immediate challenges of epistemological access, perhaps the discussion should not be whether to have English or *isi*Zulu as the main language of instruction at DUT. Notwithstanding any amount of research evidence and pedagogical justification, it is likely that students' perceptions and the value ascribed to English as compared to *isi*Zulu may not change any time soon. Rather, we should discuss how can we capitalise on the knowledge and lived experiences of indigenous language speakers at higher education institutions. How do we show an appreciation for undergraduate students in this generation who come from such disadvantaged backgrounds? These students come in with a mix of experiences and certain expectations from the institutions of higher education.

Understandably, English cannot and should not be taken or understood in exactly the same way as it was purported to be during the colonial and the apartheid era. It is partly the duty of scholars from the higher education sector to analyse critically what is taken for granted and seen as normal or common. We need a new and fresh interpretation of what it means and how it feels to be a Black undergraduate student in South Africa currently. It would be grossly unjust for students to continue suffering due to epistemological access when the doors of learning have long been opened to all in South Africa.

NOTE

1. A verbal expression of the obvious often used colloquially in South Africa.

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