

# THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN DECOLONISING TEACHING AND LEARNING: VIEWS OF MASTER'S STUDENTS AT AN OPEN DISTANCE INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

**Julliet Munyaradzi**

University of Johannesburg, South Africa  
jmunyaradzi@uj.ac.za  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4928-1451>

**Tinswalo Vivian Manyike**

University of South Africa, South Africa  
manyitv@unisa.ac.za  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8086-449>

## ABSTRACT

The 2015-2016 populist student protests in South African universities sparked interest in the discourse of transformation of higher education. Students raised concerns, which included unequal access to higher education and the need to decolonise the curricula. This compelled the government and universities to re-imagine a shift from the adopted Eurocentric curriculum content and pedagogical practices to one which embraces social justice. Since then, academics, scholars, policy makers and researchers have been grappling with the demand to transform higher education pedagogical practices such as curriculum content, methods of teaching and the language of teaching and learning. Following the 2015-2016 student protests, the government promulgated policy frameworks and directives to guide transformation in higher education to foster the centring of Africa in curricula. Consequently, universities have been adopting multilingualism and the use of Indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning, among other things, to promote equity and access, especially for students from marginalised backgrounds. This qualitative case study explored the views of ten purposively selected master's students in the education faculty on decolonisation of the language of teaching and learning at an open distance learning institution in South Africa. The study adopted a critical race theory. Data was collected using individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews and analysed thematically. Findings revealed that to decolonise the curricula and pedagogical practices, the institution should decentre Eurocentricism, and promote Indigenous languages, among other things. Findings also highlighted that the decolonisation project is not an overnight agenda; it will take time for it to be fully realised.

**Keywords:** Critical race theory, decolonisation, curriculum transformation, language of teaching and learning, open distance learning

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Decolonisation debates, especially in the global South, are a site of struggle where scholars and institutions of higher education grapple with decentring Eurocentric canons of knowledge by centring African philosophies in the curriculum (Chilisa, 2024; Gumbo, Gasa and Knaus, 2023; Mudavanhu et al., 2024). The populist 2015-2016 student protest movement in South African universities greatly sparked debates on decolonisation and transformation of the country's universities (Almeida and Kumalo, 2018). The students demanded a paradigm shift in terms of what and how they were

being taught as a praxis to address institutional Eurocentricism, institutional racism and colonial legacies. Students also demanded equal access to higher education among disadvantaged students (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2017). That constituted a call for the decolonisation of the curricula. Decolonisation in this context is understood as the dismantling of Eurocentric perspectives in designing and delivering content by centring Africa and other marginalised knowledges in the curriculum to enable students to link their experiences with learning content.

In attempting to address curriculum concerns, higher education in South Africa has promulgated policies which compel universities to transform curricula by centring Africa and marginalised knowledges in the curricula through student-centred pedagogical approaches (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; Le Grange, Du Preez, Ramrathan and Blignaut, 2020). Although universities have positively responded by attempting to implement decolonised curricula, for example, through the adoption of multilingual education, more is required since multilingual approaches inadvertently lead to hierarchisation of languages, posing more complicated challenges about student access issues in higher education due to the primary languages of teaching and learning used in universities in the country. Theoretical, philosophical and empirical studies on views of scholars and researchers on decolonisation of the language of teaching are awash in literature. However, studies on students' views on the question of the language of teaching and learning are under-researched, especially within open distance learning contexts. Conducting studies on students' perspectives and experiences on the language of teaching and multilingual education in South African higher education is critical since the students are curriculum consumers, hence equally important stakeholders in the curriculum processes.

Against this background, we formulated the following research question: How do master's students at an open distance learning institution in South Africa view the decolonisation of the language of teaching and learning? The question was addressed by an exploratory qualitative study whose objective was to explore and theorise the views and experiences from the perspectives of a sample of purposefully selected master's students.

The paper contextualised the study through a discussion of the literature, which yielded synthesised discussions aligned to decolonisation and transformation in South African higher education. The paper further provides a section on the theoretical framework which underpinned the study and framed data analysis. It also proffers sections about the methodological considerations and decisions made to gather data, explain, interpret them and discuss the findings, weaving in literature and theory.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Higher education practices in postcolonial Africa are largely characterised by what Sibanda (2021: 182) calls "Western cultural traditions, thought and epistemological practices", which are foreign to the Indigenous African. Consequently, African universities lack relevant curricula. That lack is a learning barrier to many students, especially from marginalised backgrounds. Scholars such as Battiste (2018) and Manathunga (2020) assert that when students encounter curricula with little relevance to their histories and experiences, they lose interest in learning as they discover that they are always snared in a cycle of becoming Western or Eurocentric without actually

'being'. Advocates of decolonisation research posit that the curriculum and received Western-oriented knowledge frameworks and practices in African education systems require re-examination and critique (Bhuda and Gumbo, 2024; Heleta, 2018; Hlatshwayo and Alexander, 2021; Sibanda, 2021).

In their study, Castelle, Bullen, Garvey and Jones (2018) found that African students in postcolonial higher education resist engaging in decolonisation debates on the grounds that it is a phenomenon too painful to engage in. However, Kessi (2018) examined students' views on decolonisation of higher education in South Africa and found that radical Indigenous students believe that decolonisation should be radical, foreground local content, and provide space for Indigenous Knowledge Systems. These findings resonate with Meda's (2019) study, which revealed that local content should be at the epicentre of teaching and learning whilst preserving the global North knowledges where necessary.

Mampane, Omidire and Aluko (2018) maintain that students extend their understanding of decolonisation from centring African epistemologies to include relevant, cost-free, effective technologies. From another vantage point, Khoza and Biyela (2020) affirm the role of digital technology as a pedagogical facility to decolonise and bridge the geographical separation among students and between students and lecturers. For effective bridging, open distance learning institutions should strive to promote teaching and learning in an African university, seeking relevance to their student body's experiences and cultures. Other decolonisation perspectives which subscribe to the value of curricula content which focuses on advancing local knowledge systems of teaching and learning are represented by Leibowitz (2017) who argues for a decolonisation which primarily addresses concerns about the need to address equal access to powerful forms of knowledge and cultures from marginalised communities by adopting strategies and methods which foster access and student achievement for all students. Notwithstanding the aforementioned studies, the literature indicates scant evidence of decolonisation studies from perspectives of students in open distance university contexts, particularly from the voices of postgraduate students.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study is situated in critical race theory. Critical race theorists assert that race and structural racism continue to infiltrate institutional structures in communities or contexts which have already gained independence from colonisers many years ago (Bell, 1980; 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Structural racism entails every means used by institutions of higher learning to promote and foster discrimination of less powerful groups by reinforcing inequitable practices which exacerbate marginalisation (Bailey, Feldman and Basset, 2020; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2013). This study illuminates the tools which higher education institutions use to inform the choice of language of teaching and learning and how students experience the phenomenon in relation to their positioning as privileged or marginalised groups. In South African higher education, this is immediately evident from the institutions' enduring apartheid-era linguistic racism and legacy, and prevalence of the dominance of Eurocentric languages such as English and Afrikaans, playing the role as primary media of teaching and learning. The persistent privileging and use of English and Afrikaans as languages of teaching and learning, coupled with the marginalisation of African languages in higher education, illuminates language racialisation. It further indicates

racialisation of language as a determinant of access to and success in higher education (Thomas and Maree, 2022). This observation necessitates the interpretation of the findings in this study on master's students' views on decolonising the language of teaching and learning at an open distance learning institution in South Africa from the critical race theory perspective.

According to critical race theorists such as Bell (1980; 2004), Ladson-Billings (1998; 2005) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), race plays a central role within the diverse societal structures. Dominant groups tolerate the pursuit of racial justice and equity only when their own interests are met. In other words, the interests of groups from marginalised backgrounds in achieving equity will only be accommodated when they converge with the interests of those in power (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004). Institutional racism within postcolonial higher education environments could stem from institutional policies, cultures and practices informed by the interests of the most dominant groups of people in those spaces (Bailey et al., 2020). The ability and will of the dominant group to make difficult decisions to attain equitable policies and practices may have negative implications for the social status of the powerful (Bell, 2004). In the context of this study, the impact threatens not only white people but also people of colour who hold powerful, influential positions in the education system. As a result, Bell (1980; 2004) points out that change is purposefully and deliberately slow and happens to satisfy the will and design of those in power. It implies that people in power in university contexts may be supportive only of policies and practices which do not discriminate against them (Heleta, 2018). Thus, those who influence policy making and implementation protect their own systems, statuses and experiences in the institutions of interest.

Leaning on interdisciplinary perspectives from law and the social sciences, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) theorise race and use it as an analytical tool to understand inequalities in education systems. The authors further caution that acknowledging racial, cultural and ethnic differences should incorporate bringing students and faculty members from diverse cultures into the learning environment. In the context of our study, we hold that epistemological and linguistic racism is central to efforts to understand inequality in curriculum design, delivery and access to education.

This study also utilised three critical race theory principles of Whiteness as property, race as normal, meritocracy and race neutrality as components of critiquing liberalism. The concept of Whiteness as property emanates from its ingrained relationship with privilege, thereby portraying everything Eurocentric or Western as valid and legitimate (Harris, 1995; McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). The fabric of society and structures within are intricately interwoven with practices which make the ordinary individuals in those communities accept racism as normal, as it persistently endures generational epochs. However, Ladson-Billings (2013) and DeCuir and Dixson (2004) argue that the seemingly normality in racism is not incidental but emanates from racialised hierarchisation of structures which govern the economic, social, political and educational domains, among others. Such hierarchical systems and tendencies are instrumental tools which are used to promote the systematic othering of marginalised people in these contexts. In critiquing liberalism, critical race theorists vehemently castigate concepts and constructs which merely aim to preserve the interests of dominant groups and those in power. Consequently, the critical race theory perspective highlights that ideas of meritocracy and equal opportunities do not solely

depend on merit-based achievement through individual efforts (Mitchell, 2013; Park and Liu, 2014; Solorzano and Yoso, 2001). Implications of racialisation of the language of teaching and learning should also be considered as a barrier which obstructs achievement of marginalised students who learn through a language in which they do not possess the expected competence.

The theory highlights the exclusionary nature of the curriculum processes in postcolonial universities where the ideology of the elite overrules decision-making (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). The knowledge which diverse students bring should trigger those who teach them to embrace diversity in epistemology. Thus, Whiteness or elitism should not be gatekeepers in terms of curriculum content and ways of teaching and learning. We turn to methodological decisions in the section below.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore the decolonisation of language of teaching and learning at a distance learning institution in South Africa from the views of ten master's students in the institution's faculty of education from the departments of Language Education, Early Childhood Development, Science and Technology, Leadership and Management and Curriculum and Instructional Studies. Institutional identity is anonymised to protect the institution. Since a case study is closely aligned to interpretative inquiry, it aimed to develop insights, experiences and meanings from participants' perspectives (McMillan and Schumacher, 2014).

### **Participant selection and data collection procedure**

All the postgraduate students enrolled for master's in the education programme at the open distance learning institution's faculty of education were part of the study population. Ten master's students were purposively selected from the faculty of education for data collection. Purposive sampling allowed a deliberate selection of participants knowledgeable about the decolonisation of languages of teaching and curriculum transformation. The inclusion criteria comprised master's students registered for a master's in education at the institution, master's students knowledgeable about decolonisation of curriculum, teaching and learning and being taught through a language different from their home languages. Data were gathered through individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews using an interview guide, which was pilot tested with different students to refine the questions where necessary. Although the interview method was labour-intensive, it allowed follow-up and gave the participants flexibility to express themselves (McMillan and Schumacher, 2014). Semi-structured interview questions allowed for the probing of participants' responses for more detail.

### **Ethical considerations**

The institution's Research Permission Committee granted permission for the study, and the study complied with the expected ethical conventions, formalities and protection of participant rights to anonymity and confidentiality, voluntary participation and honest interpretation of data gathered (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). Participants were given written assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right of withdrawal or to withhold any information. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms. Each interview (45 minutes long) was digitally recorded after getting consent to do so from the participants. The data

collected were only utilised for the purpose of the study, and no identifying information appears in the digital recordings, data transcriptions and findings.

### **Data analysis**

Both authors analysed the data according to six phases of thematic analysis, which is compatible with interpretative paradigms (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis comprises an account of themes which emerged in empirical data. Firstly, all data were transcribed verbatim. Thereafter, the transcriptions were read and re-read for meaning until familiarity with all aspects of the data was reached. Secondly, codes which identified striking characteristics of the data were manually generated by systematically working through the entire data set. Thirdly, codes were sorted into potential themes using inductive thematic analysis. Phase four entailed the refinement of the themes identified in phase three. In the fifth phase, identified themes were further refined. The final analysis of themes culminated in the report write-up. The analysis moved beyond description to interpretation and explanation (Clarke and Braun, 2013), and the underpinning theoretical framework and literature were interwoven with the findings. Multi-method strategies, such as audit trail, credibility, dependability, member checking and transferability, ensured trustworthiness (McMillan and Schumacher, 2014).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Three themes emerged from the data: the concept of decolonisation, Indigenous languages as tools to support learning and English hegemony at the institution.

### **The concept of decolonisation**

The participants viewed decolonisation of the university as entailing the shift from the continued adherence to Eurocentric curriculum design, content and what to teach and how to teach. The statements below provide evidence:

*I see it as shifting to placing what the policies and modules contain from being absolutely Western. When they shift to value and place our African thinking and ways we understand (Precious, Language Education).*

*Making it African, yes, for the benefit of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Maria, Early Childhood Development).*

*Decolonisation of curriculum should entail validating the knowledges of the marginalised by removing coloniality from what is designed as the module content (Jairos, Inclusive Education).*

The excerpts above indicate the participants' views of decolonising teaching and learning to entail the grounding of African Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, to promote access to education for students who come from marginalised backgrounds, and to promote social justice. This represents a radical desire to move global North epistemologies from the centre of curriculum processes and replace them with African-centred practices. The findings corroborate Badat (2017), Mamdani (2018) and Sebidi and Morreira (2017), who argue that the university pedagogical practice should embrace centring Africa.

A decolonised curriculum should be disentangled from Eurocentric knowledge as the objective reality, since the world is not homogenous. The world consists of people with different beliefs, identities and attitudes (Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2005). Accommodating cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the diverse student body assists curriculum designers, developers, and implementers to plan, develop and deliver curriculum content through inclusive pedagogical practices to ensure the achievement of social and cognitive justice in teaching and learning.

From a critical race theory perspective, it follows that, in the politics of what constitutes knowledge, there is never a neutral collection of knowledge (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) since knowledge which becomes legitimate is created out of cultural and class tensions. Consequently, the 'what' and 'how' it should be produced contribute to the reproduction of the dominance and subordination dichotomy (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In that dichotomy, the elite culture legitimises social differences and functions which are evident between and among those who are more powerful (Bourdieu, 1984). In cases where the subordinates seek to challenge the status quo, it is an ideological attack in the eyes of the powerful.

### **Indigenous languages as tools to support learning**

The findings further revealed that the institution's language policy includes Indigenous languages as a medium to support learning. The participants applauded such a policy by explaining the advantages as illustrated in the excerpts below:

*This university recognises local languages, to decolonise the way teaching is done (Jerry, Science and Technology Education).*

*The use of Indigenous languages to support teaching and learning improves students' academic outcome (Simba, Leadership and Management).*

*It will be best if the language policy allows all students at their different levels of higher education studies to write assignments and examinations in their home (Otilia, Language Education).*

*Learning in my home language would truly show that this university is accommodating students who would otherwise not succeed academically using English medium of instruction. I think if possible, they should strive to write modules in our different home languages (Sibongile, Science and Technology).*

Two other participants specifically addressed the advantages of using the Indigenous languages in postgraduate research. One participant referred to the supervisor feedback provided in her home language thus:

*When my supervisor calls me to clarify his feedback which he would have emailed me, he speaks in Tshivenda. We are both Venda home language speakers. It helps me when I go back to the chapter review comments which he writes in English. I always understand the comments better after getting clarification in Tshivenda (Marbel, Early Childhood Development).*

However, a divergent view was raised by a participant who indicated:

*The use of Indigenous languages in higher education will lower the standard. The world operates in English and I want to be able to work anywhere in the world. Also the majority of global students studying at this institution do not understand South African home languages. As an open distance university and the mode of communication is largely through digital technologies, we still have to like English (Simba, Leadership and Management).*

The excerpts show that the participants embrace the use of South African Indigenous Knowledge to scaffold learning. It is remarkable that findings show that the open distance learning institution elevates the status of these languages, which enhances the academic success of speakers of these languages (Alexander, 2013). From a critical race theory perspective, the use of African languages to scaffold learning is a progressive move to challenge linguistic imperialism by promoting the development of Indigenous languages as intellectual languages. Notwithstanding, using African languages to scaffold learning may illuminate the hierarchisation of languages in which local languages play a subordinate role.

### **English hegemony**

Findings also revealed that, despite attempts to decolonise the language of teaching and learning at the institution, English hegemony is still prevalent since Indigenous languages are only used in supportive roles while English is the primary language of teaching and learning. This finding is illustrated by the statements below:

*Most of the teaching and learning at our university is done through English medium of instruction, and this is common in many universities globally (Jairos, Inclusive Education).*

*Here, English remains the primary language of teaching and learning. But for masters and doctoral students the policy allows the students who like to write their dissertations in a preferred home language if there is enough human resources capacity for that (Otilia, Language Education).*

*In the university's language policy, although other languages are accommodated, they are only used to scaffold learning (Simba, Leadership and Management).*

Findings further revealed that English as a medium of instruction is a barrier to the development of the Indigenous languages as media of instruction, as evidenced in the excerpt below:

*Using English for teaching and learning oppresses and dominates other languages and cultures (Marbel, Early Childhood Development).*

Three other participants had divergent views on the issue and highlighted the value of English proficiency in a global context:

*We should realise that although use of English is an example of colonisation, it is the gateway to economic freedom in the world, hence many choose to*

*be taught through English medium over their home languages (Tranos, Inclusive Education).*

*The language of instruction must be universal. We may be agitating for decolonisation of the language of instruction, yet we become short-sighted because upon graduation the graduates become “colonised” and are not free to work anywhere else except here where South African Indigenous languages are spoken (Tinos, Early Childhood Development).*

*With the internationalisation of universities, it is now impossible to halt the use of English medium of instruction (Jairos, Inclusive Education).*

The findings captured two contrasting perceptions regarding the hegemony of English as a medium of teaching. Some participants perceived the hegemony of English as promoting linguistic imperialism. Others opine that the promotion of Indigenous languages as media of instruction will limit the open distance learning graduates' opportunities to compete in the globalised village. The bone of contention is to critically engage with which strategy should be followed.

The findings about the hegemony of English discussed above resonate with other studies (Le Roux, 2016; Mahabeer, 2018). Thus, according to the critical race theory principle of Whiteness and racism as normal, linguistic racism in the institution's language policy could be taking over from racism in more subtle ways, which hierarchise social groups. These findings reinforce the disadvantages experienced by English second language students who must use English as a medium of teaching despite multilingual language provisions in the 1996 Constitution and supporting legislation.

According to the critical race theory, the language policies in postcolonial education systems are grounded in linguistic racism, which gives rise to hierarchies of languages with English at the top (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) and Indigenous languages at the bottom. Lecturers and academics should be cognisant of linguistic imperialism in students' learning when they use English for teaching and learning. They should raise awareness about cultural interpretations which students from less dominant groups may have and how curriculum designers and implementers at the institution may tap into that to improve practice.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study was a qualitative intrinsic case study that explored the decolonisation of the curriculum from the perspectives of ten students at the open distance learning institution. This small sample is characteristic of exploratory qualitative research, which seeks depth, not breadth; hence, findings may not be generalised to other university contexts. Also noteworthy is that semi-structured individual interviews were used to elicit data from the participants because all the participants felt comfortable with this method. Future researchers may employ focus group discussions for data gathering techniques and/or mixed methods approach to explore the phenomenon of decolonisation of the curriculum in higher education.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study's aim was to explore the perspectives of ten master's students on decolonisation of the language of teaching and learning at an open distance learning

institution. Findings highlight that African and other marginalised knowledges should play a central role in a decolonised curriculum. Further, the decolonisation of the pedagogical practices helps to promote equal access to learning for every student. However, due to the dominance of English, which is a lingua franca, the use of the language of teaching in Indigenous languages currently remains an ideal that may take a long time to be fully realised. For the decolonial project to be implemented more easily, we suggest that the Department of Basic Education, which is a feeder for higher education should contribute by decolonising the curriculum at the grassroots level of education.

The language question in higher education is a global challenge which haunts not only South African universities but also other global South higher education contexts as well as those in the North. The language of teaching and learning discourse poses challenges that contemporary researchers/academics/scholars grapple with.

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