

The Preservation of Culture and Indigenous Languages in a Multiculturalism Context

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Abstract

Culture as a way of life ought to be preserved accordingly in different indigenous communities that prides itself with their heritage. Language transfers knowledge and practices that instils indigenous life skills education to a particular ethnic group maintaining their culture for their own benefit. The issue behind the distortion of culture and indigenous languages is that people adopt different cultures and languages from other spectrums. This paper aims to underpin various strategies that can be utilized to maintain one's culture and language through embracing their identities even in a multicultural setting. This paper applies a mixed method approach with an indigenous paradigmatic lens to elucidate meaning on the trends and arguments within the challenges and preservation of culture and indigenous languages. The study identified North-West University's (NWU) Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (BIKS) students as participants and a sample of 50 students from various ethnic communities were sampled purposively. Data was collected using a questionnaire and it was analysed using thematic analysis and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The paper finds that although some languages and cultures are viewed as inferior towards the contemporary education, there is a need for a policy shift in a multicultural setting. Embracing and mainstreaming culture and language within the education system of South Africa will ensure that the education becomes meaningful and relevant. The paper concludes that institutions of learning should develop and implement language policies which will ensure that various indigenous languages are intertwined within the teaching and learning missions of these institutions. Mainstreaming culture and languages ensure a solid sense of belonging(heritage) that will move from generation to generation through institutions of learning.

Keywords: Culture, Indigenous Language, Education

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Introduction

Language plays an important role towards the transfer of knowledge, wisdom and experiences. It is a line of communication that brings about a one's sense of belonging within a certain ethnic group. So, to say, the role of research in underpinning the preservation of culture and indigenous languages in a multicultural setting is key to foster the revitalization one's identity.¹ Without research and publications, the revitalization and preservation of culture with languages goes into extinction due to not being put at the centre of exposure by researchers and publishers not embracing their own identities.²

In the academic diaspora, people meet from all works of life and exchange knowledge through same or different languages. With some being adoptive of certain cultures, they end up shifting from their own ways of life to another leading to their own cultures and languages in danger. Many of researchers or scholars believe that writing and publishing may keep indigenous languages alive in a dynamic and technologically driven society. According to Bernard *et al.* (2020), linguists are very important in the academic dispensation because they can create publishing houses and language preservation nest programs that will perpetuate culture and language diversity within multi-ethnic society.

In South Africa, the concept of Ubuntu has always been at the forefront of creating a harmonious society that will accept one's culture and language without discrimination, inferiority and rejection. With the use of African indigenous life skills educational background ubuntu philosophy is disseminated with the principles, values and customs enshrined in one's character since the brought-up phase. This clarifies that the ubuntu philosophy is one tool that can be adopted by any ethnic group since it resembles humanity (botho) around the world with different cultures and languages that thrives to survive in the catastrophic space of emerging ways of life (Johnson & Quan-Bafour, 2015).

As mentioned above, African indigenous life skills education plays a crucial role in indigenous communities of South Africa, however institutions of higher learning should be the ones carrying out the mandate of language and culture preservation with its policies. This creates a space of language proficiency for students, graduates and workers who want to pursue their interests in multilinguistic associations that will assist in promoting language and culture (Lo Bianco, 2010). Be that as it may, some countries have lost their indigenous languages because they were seen as inferior and there were no strategies put in place to embrace, promote and preserve them.

Through the reflection of research in indigenous knowledge systems unique to a specific group of people, culture and language is at the forefront of everything. Indigenous philosophical underpinnings of indigenous knowledge research emphasize the use of language in research as it carries knowledge from the participants engaging freely without any difficulty (Bhuda, 2021). Moreover, there cannot be people without culture hence culture and language cannot be separated from each other they are interlinked for reasons that are outmost best for a human being.³ The sole purpose of this research is to mainstream culture

¹ Aiseng, K. (2024). Theoretical Underpinning. In *The Sociolinguistics of South African Television: Language Ideologies in Selected Case Studies* (pp. 45-85). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

² Hermes, M., Bang, M., & Marin, A. (2012). Designing Indigenous language revitalization. *Harvard educational review*, 82(3), 381-402.

³ Gehlawat, D. *The Interlinking of Language, Culture and Communication in Literature*.

and indigenous languages in a multicultural context, remind people that one's culture and language is important.

Challenges and Prospects of Indigenous Languages and Culture in Higher Institutions of Learning

Institutions of higher learning are the main advocators of knowledge preservation, disseminators and should be the ones scrutinizing the indigenous languages and culture preservation discourse (Kuznetsova, 2020). There are challenges that employees and students face in the corridors of institutions not only personally but language barriers affecting their academic and work performance. Although English is the universal language built in within the teaching and learning frameworks of other systems, native languages should also be mainstreamed in the curriculum to embrace decolonial agenda that seeks to uphold one's identity from any spectrum (Macedo, 2019).

It is also crucial to note that curriculum and pedagogy is deeply implicated in the grounding, validating bases to a narrative transformation and transform higher education in institutions (Maditsi & Bhuda, 2023). This can be achieved by mainstreaming various scholars, including indigenous scholars who can stand steadfast and counter the non-transformation that seems to bring the HEIs around the world to stagnation. The colonial era in the case of South Africa, repressed indigenous knowledge as well as indigenous worldviews with its epistemologies hence the unequal language and cultural preference (Bredlid & Botha, 2015).

African indigenous languages with its culture and other knowledge systems around the world are left at the periphery of knowledge economy due to Eurocentric knowledge domain and worldviews that perpetuates marginalization and inferiority complex (Shewadeg, 2023). Most of the students, encounter a designed culture at higher institutions of learning and end up struggling to adjust, for obvious reasons it is different from what they are accustomed to (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Furthermore, most of the students end up dropping and going home due to the challenging environment and there are others who develop resilience to adapt, acclimatize and cope with the challenges.

For rural students it is a challenge, basically peers coming from an urban area signifies a fast life and they seem to be more privileged than the others. In a nutshell, this is true because they can make a lot of friends in a short space of time and can communicate their challenges to their instructors better (Ajani & Gamede, 2020). This is due to the language issue from different backgrounds to the higher institutions of learning. However, this does not limit nor define student's progress towards academic achievement and life choices. In addition, institutions of higher learning should consider reworking the student's programs in the system to allow full participation of students from different aspects of life and condemn skin, culture and language intolerance (Billet, 2009).

Field & Morgan-Klein (2010), alludes that there should be transitional phases which includes three elements "exclusion marked by rites of separation, the liminal phase characterised by rites of transformation, and incorporation where the new identity is marked and where the individual is incorporated into society as a new kind of social person". According to Maditsi & Bhuda (2024), the positive phase of institutions of higher learning in preservation of culture and language is that it transitions a student social and cultural standing by equipping them with formal credentials, knowledge, new social networks, and to varied degrees, altered lifestyles.

In comparison with the students found to attend the same institution from different settings, the rural student seems to be grounded more on their cultural beliefs unlike the ones from the urban areas.⁴ It is because the rural ones were taught in a different way, from an African perspective indigenous life skills education from home plays a key role. Moreover, even though rural students have limited networking stands a chance of leaving the institutions after graduation with their own solid culture and language which they use on daily basis (Nelson, 2019). Without biasness, students from urban areas are likely to leave the institutions of higher learning with diluted language and adopted cultures that does not define who they are and what they stand for.

Not glorifying the challenges that students and employees face at higher education, universities are doing better in trying to create space for all the student equitably without favouritism to cab the challenges that they encounter (Bozat, 2020). Teaching and learning at higher institutions become easier through the involvement of the following skills: listening and speaking, writing and presenting, reading and viewing, as well as language structures and conventions. This is done throughout the module outcome guidelines by the instructors to give students a clearer understanding of what is required from them as the tomorrow's graduate who are going to contribute to the local economy of their countries.

The Role of African Indigenous Languages and Culture in Research

Philosophical Approaches in Research

Language plays an important role in research generally, communication flows by words that create a language. Indigenous knowledge research is enriched by African indigenous languages because that is where knowledge holders freely give knowledge using language (Manyike & Shava, 2018). In simple terms, knowledge is embedded in language and research is dependent on language. It is important for researchers particularly the ones from Indigenous knowledge system background to note that embracing African research, language is of paramount and significant. Knowledge transfer is dependent on language, researcher in general depend on language to communicate to the knowledge holders.⁵

Language difficulties can cause a serious negative effect in the social sphere particularly in research because that is where the knowledge is embedded (Verkhovod *et al.*, 2023). A researcher would collect data, transcribe it and translate it into English but end up losing the rich meaning of what the participant was trying to say hence the importance of language. It does not matter from which background the researcher is coming from; language plays a crucial role within the space of research. Therefore, it is important for scholars to always revert to their participants for verification of what they had provided during the interviews (Birt *et al.*, 2016). Most of the participants from the local communities use their indigenous languages as it is the language of communication and more of what they know can only be expressed through their language.

According to Addis (2016), there is tacit and explicit knowledge, and these two kinds of knowledge differs according to their reveal, tacit knowledge is difficult to be solely

⁴ Jannat, M., Onee, K., & Nahid, M. (2022). Effect of Culture on English Language Practice: A Comparative Study between the Urban and the Rural Background Students. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 27, 46-53.

⁵ Vintar, Š., & Grčić Simeunović, L. (2017). Definition frames as language-dependent models of knowledge transfer. *Fachsprache-Journal of Professional and Scientific Communication*, 39(1+ 2), 43-48.

transferred whereas explicit can be. Therefore, one must be critical when dealing with such by considering the use of language and how they will analyse without distorting the actual meaning of what they collected (Alase, 2017). Theoretically in research, the researcher ought to position themselves within the study phenomenon and create a strong narrative of whatever they want to solve with their research. In the African indigenous research, scholars usually utilize the indigenous standpoint theory which positions themselves towards the study phenomenon. This further describes their experiences in terms of political, social and cultural stance of the researched phenomenon (Cox *et al.*, 2021). However, this is complicit with the use of languages that are used when conducting a study and how the participant's cultures relate with the study phenomenon.

Through research and publications language and culture can be preserved moreover they will play a role in revitalizing one's identity hence in the definition of indigenous knowledge, knowledge is transferred from generations to generations.⁶ In the academic diaspora, knowledge holders are the centre of a successful research because they are the ones providing rich information and views about cultures with their languages therefore is no language and culture role in research without them. According to Chilisa (2019), it is important for researchers to proudly begin to recover, value, and internationalizing Indigenous research methodologies to showcase their interests in language and cultural stance.

The hierarchy between the dominance of indigenous languages and cultures is obviously influenced by one's identity, embracing and perpetuating values with principles that guides them. Wolters (2015) argues that English is the *Lingua franca* in philosophy of science and scholars who plays an academic game outside this trail, they are likely not to get recognition in places of academes. This is one of the reasons why most of languages fade away as they are not utilised more in publications and research because of unequal privilege (Cameron *et al.*, 2018). If all languages could be equal in research and publications, the preservation of culture discourse would be doable in institutions of higher learning, strategic organizations and the society.

Incorporating Indigenous Pedagogies to Foster Teaching and Learning at Higher Education Institutions

Ubuntu Philosophy Towards Higher Education System

Throughout the document where the gapes have been identified, there is a need to highlight the most critical issues that are experienced by the society with regards to the higher learning institutions. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs') have been challenged by society that their teaching and learning (T&L) strategies fail to focus and dwell on the problems that are experienced by communities (Maditsi *et al.*, 2024). This involves computer learning skills, language barriers and culture, difficulties of online learning, urban life and adaption, struggles of students making friends in the environment. The whole of the mentioned challenges is at the centre of why educational progress is sometimes stagnant for students that are not familiar with the current contemporary education system (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

⁶ Gundakanal, S. S., & Kaddipujar, M. (2024). CULTURAL CUSTODIANS: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN PRESERVING AND PROMOTING LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND HERITAGE.

From an African indigenous perspective, it is important to note that when solving mentioned issues to foster teaching styles (pedagogy) ubuntu philosophy is of paramount noteworthiness. According to Assié-Lumumba (2017), ubuntu philosophy has the power to reunite students and university staff members, create a conducive learning environment by fostering harmony, inclusiveness among students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The notion does not end there but deeper understanding is required to grasp its concepts and principles to incorporate it into the educational system (Masondo, 2017).

The authors of this current study felt that it is crucial to converse about the frameworks that are built within the current educational system, whether internationally or nationally because every ethnic group has its own unique preference. Educational frameworks at higher institutions of learning lack the essence of cultural tolerance and language promotion/preservation.⁷ Therefore, there is a need to reshuffle the curriculum to incorporate other pedagogical approach such as indigenous knowledge systems, that perpetuates studies involving one's culture and language tolerance (Mpungose, 2020).

The reality about the phenomenon, lack of realization and use of indigenous languages in lecture rooms has also contributed to the negative image of the institutions as they are viewed as being detached from the realities of society (Canagarajah, 2024). Now today, the demand for outsourcing knowledge holders from the society into the educational system is becoming higher than expected (Kaya & Seleti, 2013). Research is conducted from knowledge holders within the communities, the realization of preserving culture and languages should begin by certifying the researched people and mainstreaming their pedagogical approaches into the educational systems.

Conclusions

The study concentrated on challenging and preserving culture, inter/multiculturalism and language. The authors came up with a substantiating title of "*The preservation of culture and indigenous languages in a multiculturalism context*" to broaden the scope of research to acquire more insights of the challenges and prospects faced by students in higher institutions of learning. The study was conducted in the Northwest University, Mafikeng Campus with the Bachelor of Indigenous knowledge systems students. This study employed mixed method approach where qualitative and quantitative data was collected and merged. The authors used purposive sampling and snowballing with interpretivism and descriptive paradigm. Fifty (50) students were identified for the study. Ten (10) of each representing first year until masters. The collected was analysed using two methods, quantitative data analysed using statistical package of social sciences (SPSS) and qualitative data analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2017) six phases. The study also showed that building resilience towards preserving languages and culture is important for the society. Set of questions were asked to the students and the following were the main findings of the study.

⁷ Brown-Jeffy, S., & Cooper, J. E. (2011). Toward a conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy: An overview of the conceptual and theoretical literature. *Teacher education quarterly*, 38(1), 65-84.

Language

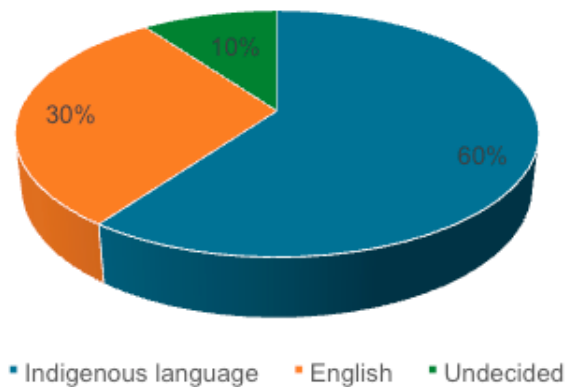


Figure 1: Student's Responses on Language Importance

After the collection of data, the following results were discovered out of 100% rate; sixty (60%) of the students indicated that using indigenous languages in a higher institution of learning is vital for cognitive learning and will help to create harmonious environments for all the student in the same space. Most of their responses related to the preservation of languages and culture (60%) were sure and positive. Thirty (30%) of them indicated that English is the best language of exchange, easy to learn, writing in research and publishing. Ten (10%) of the students were undecided and feel that English and indigenous languages must coexist for a harmonious and conducive learning environment. With the authors analysis, the students who indicated the importance of preserving culture and languages were from rural areas and small portion of them were from urban setting.

Culture

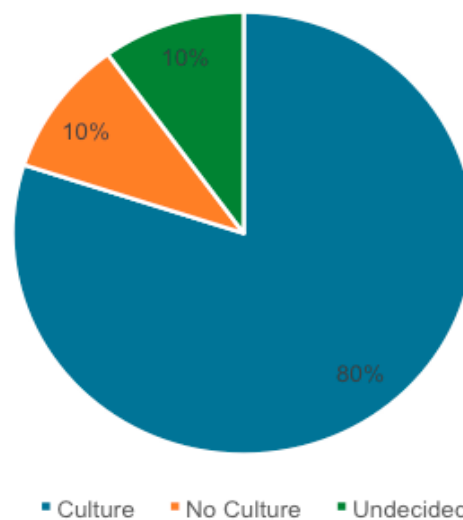


Figure 2: Student's Responses to Culture and Its Importance

Eighty (80%) of the students agreed that culture has a serious role to play in learning institutions and in society at large to preserve its values and principles. Ten (10%) of the students disagreed that culture has a role in shaping the society and important for individuals. This is the view that they have according to their backgrounds and lifestyle choices. Ten (10%) was undecided on whether culture is relevant in a society or not. Furthermore, this is one of the pieces of evidence that the incorporation of pedagogies is required at higher learning institutions.

Language as Conveyer of Valuable Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge

The responses of the students were unique in terms of how they view participation in research particularly with language and knowledge. Language conveys knowledge with its richness and multiple facets that strengthens social constructs between the knowledge holders of indigenous knowledge and the researcher. Without language, indigenous knowledge and culture will not be preserved and assimilated to the decolonial discourse within the current contemporary education. The relationship between language and indigenous knowledge goes beyond through preserving concepts and epistemologies that shapes one's identity. Moreover, research will still depend on language philosophy because it underpins research enormously.

Multiculturalism Embodies Ubuntu and Collective Learning

From an African perspective, a group of indigenous people are viewed as a collective whether multiracial or not. This is the application of ubuntu concepts that perpetuates values, inclusiveness, tolerance, heritage and unity. Senior students (masters) indicated that ubuntu philosophy is key to the revitalization of culture and indigenous languages by enforcing humanity, compassion, respect, dignity, and reciprocal caring for lively environment. With the concept of multiculturalism and the application ubuntu, collective learning at higher institutions of learning will be achievable without any racial discrimination, racism and verbal harassments.

Culture as a Way of Life and Knowing

Senior students emphasized that culture in forms the ways of knowing, how to learn, write and present in the academic spaces. This took the authors back to the pedagogical discourse, ways of introducing and application of different styles of teaching in higher institutions of learning. Some of the students stated that they believe in what they are being taught from because institutional cultural space comprises of different people grasping and ending up losing themselves along the academic journey. However, they do not have a problem with cultural exchange but one must remain grounded throughout the journey.

In conclusion, there is a need for policy shifting within the higher education system for the recognition of other languages that indigenous scholars would like to use in research and publications. It is mandatory for students to be technologically literate and use English as their primary language of teaching, which presents a problem and obstacle for students from rural areas. Rural students have a hard time fitting into university culture, which limits their ability to ask for assistance when they encounter challenges. Receiving assistance from university officials and taking part in events that promote interaction and a seamless transition to higher education are the best ways to proceed. Within the African institutions of higher learning, there are built in euro-centric frameworks that postulates individualism and continues to detach students, instructors and management from the social realities. In addition, neo liberal ideologies enjoys the superior ranking within African and other state's education, that is a real problem because they promote self-efficacy, self-reliance and centralism hence why African advocates for Ubuntu philosophy that fosters solidarity and collectiveness. Multiculturalism on its own, it's a quest to decolonise, preserve culture and language by challenging institutions such as social, educational, financial and other institutions that absorbs people from all walks of life. Indigenous knowledge plays an important role when dealing with concepts that involves culture and indigenous languages affiliated to any state or country.

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