From Fluency to Flourishing: The Influence of English Language Proficiency on Research Student Success

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Abstract
In most post-colonial African states, colonial languages occupy prominent teaching, learning, and research spaces. While South Africa has made significant strides in recognising Indigenous languages through policies and restorative legislation, the level of uptake of Indigenous languages has remained a thorny issue. The marginalisation of indigenous languages can have dire consequences for research students in particular, for example, cultural disconnection and biases, linguistic barriers, and identity conflict, among other things. On this basis, this study sought to explore how proficiency in English influences Indigenous student success in postgraduate student research programmes. To achieve this aim, the study employed a qualitative research approach and a case study design. Data were collected from 21 participants comprising nine Indigenous PhD students, seven Indigenous Master's students, and five supervisors who were purposively sampled. The study's findings reveal that proficiency in English significantly influences the success of postgraduate students at the selected university in several ways, including communication skills, engagement with supervisors and peers, and networking and collaboration with researchers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The study recommends language support programs, intercultural competence training, mentorship and support structures, and facilitating networking opportunities. Through promoting inclusive practices, the university can enhance the academic success of postgraduate students.

Keywords: Cultural Disconnection, Inclusive Practices, Linguistic Barriers, Postgraduate Research, Supervision

Introduction

In post-colonial African states, the legacy of colonialism continues to exert a profound influence on education systems, with colonial languages occupying dominant roles in teaching, learning, and research (Meighan, 2023; Mutongoza et al., 2023a). This dominance of colonial languages permeates all levels of the education system, from primary schools to universities (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020; Mutongoza et al., 2023b). Textbooks, instructional materials, and academic resources are predominantly available in colonial languages, limiting access for students who may be more proficient in their indigenous languages (Bokana, 2014; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). Despite efforts to recognise and promote Indigenous languages, the uptake of these languages in academic settings remains a contentious issue (Mwaniki, 2012; Mkhize, 2018). While South Africa stands as an exception, having made significant strides in acknowledging Indigenous languages through policies and restorative legislation, the degree of adoption and integration of Indigenous languages into academic discourse has been limited, posing challenges for students and scholars alike (Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021; Joubert & Sibanda, 2022).

Completing postgraduate research degrees in South Africa is not without systemic and institutional challenges that hinder the progress of research students as well as affect the country's overall innovation capacity. Desmennu and Owoaje (2018) reveal that the chronic underfunding of higher education institutions translates into limited resources for research, such as inadequate lab equipment, restricted access to academic journals, and insufficient opportunities for fieldwork. Additionally, the infrastructure at many universities, including research facilities and libraries, often falls short of what is needed to support high-level research activities (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). Another significant challenge is the high student-to-supervisor ratio. According to Mavundla (2023), supervisors report being overburdened with large numbers of students, limiting the amount of individual attention and guidance they can provide. Lategan et al. (2023) add that the administrative responsibilities placed on supervisors reduce the time available for effective mentorship. Moreover, supervisors lack professional development opportunities, which can lead to outdated or less effective supervision practices (Ramnund-Masingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020). Mutongoza (2023) adds that students' and supervisors' mental health and well-being is also frequently overlooked, further complicating the supervision dynamic.

Additionally, because students from marginalised communities are systematically excluded, they often appear to lack the foundational knowledge or research skills necessary for postgraduate studies, putting them at a disadvantage (Ramnund-Masingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020). As such, even where scholarship and funding opportunities are available, they often systematically exclude these mostly Black student populations. The dynamics of supervision itself present further complications because some supervisors are not adequately trained in mentorship, which can lead to a variance in the quality of supervision provided (Lategan, Nel, & Bitzer, 2023). Mutongoza (2023) argues that the organisation of power in academia also results in reports of exploitation and a chronic lack of support for the student's independent research interests. Moreover, the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and supervisors can lead to misunderstandings or communication issues, while gender biases may affect the supervision experience, particularly for female students in male-dominated fields (Herman, 2011; Ramnund-Masingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020).

The marginalisation of Indigenous languages in academia can have far-reaching consequences, particularly for postgraduate research students. Cultural disconnection, biases,

linguistic barriers, and identity conflicts have been found to impede these students' academic progress and personal development (Rose et al., 2020; Mabena et al., 2021). These issues can potentially limit access to knowledge and opportunities for Indigenous students and further perpetuate systematic inequalities that undermine the diversity of the academic landscape (Jeyaraj, 2018; Quinto, 2022; Mutongoza et al., 2023b). Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need to explore the role of language proficiency, particularly in English, in shaping the success of postgraduate research students (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020; Amalia & Jaya, 2023). This study sought to address this gap by investigating how proficiency in English influences the academic journey of Indigenous postgraduate students at a selected university.

Framing the Concept of Indigeneity

Defining the concept of Indigeneity remains a hotly contested undertaking in academic and theoretical debates. Trigger and Dalley (2010) remind us that while the field involves a passionate commitment to advocacy among scholars, theoretical clarity is needed to understand who might be considered Indigenous and why this is so. 'Indigenous' refers to peoples engaged in an often-desperate struggle for political rights, land, a place and space within a modern nation's economy and society (Guenther et al., 2006; Gomes, 2012). After a comprehensive review of the attempts at defining this concept, Corntassel (2003) proposed four criteria for defining indigenous peoples. Firstly, Corntassel (2003) believed that Indigenous peoples are peoples who believe they are ancestrally related and identify themselves, based on oral and/or written histories, as descendants of the original inhabitants of their ancestral lands. In addition, Corntassel (2003) argues that Indigenous peoples have their own informal or formal political, economic, and social institutions, which tend to be communal-based and reflect their distinct ceremonial cycles, kinship networks, and continuously evolving cultural traditions. Thirdly, Indigenous people speak (or once spoke) an indigenous language different from the dominant society's language, with distinct dialects and uniquely indigenous expressions often persisting as a form of identity even when the language is no longer spoken. Finally, the fourth criterion Corntassel (2003) established is that Indigenous peoples distinguish themselves from the dominant society and other cultural groups while maintaining a close relationship with their ancestral lands and sacred sites.

This study domesticates Corntassel's four criteria for defining Indigeneity in the context of South Africa. Regarding ancestral heritage as a pointer of Indigeneity, we draw from studies such as Adams et al. (2014), who depose that Indigenous South Africans consist primarily of the Khoikhoi, San and Bantu peoples. Regarding communal organisation, we rely on Seroto (2011), who identified the Khoi, the San and the Bantu groups of South Africa as indigents. In the context of South Africa, scholars such as Ngcobo and Nomdebevana (2010) define Indigeneity in terms of the nine constitutionally recognised languages, namely isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, sePedi, Sesotho, SeTswana, siSwati, and TshiVenda. We further acknowledge Ngulube (2012), who considers the Khoi and San languages endangered Indigenous languages. Finally, concerning ties to ancestral homes, Skosana (2022) argues that the Indigenous struggle against apartheid was premised on undoing the land dispossession that was facilitated by a series of colonial and apartheid laws that intended to deepen segregation and confer material gains for a portion of South Africa's population.

Methodology

Located within a qualitative approach, the study was grounded in a single case study design in which the case was a selected faculty at a university in South Africa. The case selection

was based on self-reported struggles in postgraduate research studies that delayed the completion of degrees. Within the selected case, the study began with an envisaged sample of ten Master's students, ten PhD students, and five supervisors purposively sampled for participation. The criteria for inclusion in the study were the participants' first language being an indigenous language other than English, having been enrolled at least for two years for their studies, and the supervisors had to have supervised students who are not English first speakers over at least two years. The sample of participants comprised seven Master's students, nine PhD students, and five supervisors, totalling 21 participants. Having obtained the required permissions, the researcher collected data using focus group discussions with the students and semi-structured interviews with the supervisors and analysed it thematically as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, the analysed data from the three participant groups were triangulated.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

When asked about how proficiency in English influences the academic success of postgraduate research students at the university, the participants' responses revealed three main categories: language and communication limitations, resource and accessibility challenges, and social and networking challenges. Below is a more detailed presentation and discussion of these findings.

Language and Communication Limitations

Several participants revealed language and communication-related challenges, such as difficulty with academic jargon, language mastery, comprehension, communication skills, and understanding feedback. A case can be drawn from a Master's student who revealed,

> Being a second speaker of English sets me up for greater difficulty in my research. Some technical and discipline-specific aspects are really confusing for me because English is not my language. I often have to ask for help from my peers, but sometimes, I feel like I am becoming a burden to them. It is tough being a second-language speaker. (Master's Student 5)

Similar sentiments were also echoed by a PhD student who commented,

> The technical elements of academic writing are challenging for us, who are not native speakers of English. Fortunately, I have a very patient supervisor – I get corrected more graciously, and we tend not to focus on the grammar but the depth of the arguments and reasoning. (PhD Student 3)

A supervisor also weighed in and said,

> We are in a linguistically diverse country where, in principle, we all agree that all languages are important, but the system does not seem to appreciate this. As a supervisor, one needs to be considerate, especially of groups whose languages are neglected in university education, where English and Afrikaans have been leading. If one is not careful, one may fall into the trap of becoming a language editor instead of guiding the student on a research journey. You may also make the mistake of losing sight of the main aim – helping the student make progress. Indigenous students tend

> to be mistreated on account of their command of the language of writing their research. (Supervisor 2)

Another PhD student also revealed the following,

> It is difficult to understand concepts taught with a language you have not mastered. Some of the key struggles I have faced include the challenge of communicating and writing effectively…I particularly face the challenge in Social Science theories. Many of them are complex to understand, and I often have to read more in order to understand them. (PhD Student 7*)*

This was corroborated by a Master's student who argued,

> If you are fluent in English here, you can almost say that you have done half of the work. I have been supervised by a native English speaker who I could tell was being offended by my lack of command of English…I felt like I was annoying the supervisor, so I requested the responsible officials to change me to an Indigenous supervisor. It was an uncomfortable experience that I felt dealt a blow to my confidence as a postgraduate student. (Master's Student 1)

The findings above reveal that Indigenous postgraduate students face significant challenges with academic jargon, language mastery, comprehension, and communication, impacting their academic progress and confidence. Participants described the burden of frequently seeking help, the emotional toll of perceived insensitivity from supervisors, and the extra effort needed to understand complex theories, particularly in social sciences. These findings corroborate with Nachatar Singh and Jack (2022), who reveal that academic success reflects the extent to which they are given opportunities to engage in linguistic development in their new educational setting. In fact, it is normal for some students, as reported here, to feel like they are burdening their colleagues when they seek assistance understanding language (Gutierrez et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2020). Dobinson and Mercieca (2020) warn that the relegation of some languages to the periphery at the expense of others is linguistic racism, and it often results in disconnection. As with the findings presented here, Rodríguez et al. (2016) argue that less proficient students are significantly disadvantaged by pedagogies that emphasise a 'standard language' of communication and expression. These findings reveal the urgent need for a more inclusive academic environment that embraces linguistic diversity to prevent feelings of isolation, inadequacy and compromised academic performance among non-native English speakers.

Resource and Accessibility Challenges

Participants also revealed that they grappled with challenges related to resource accessibility and time management, stemming from the need for extended efforts to understand the material. This can be noted from a PhD student who highlighted,

> Regarding material, our colleagues who speak proper English and were taught English as a home language have a head start on us. Never mind that I am doing a PhD right now, I still have to think in my native language, process things in my language, and then mentally translate those things into English. Before coming to university, it was always said that we must value our identity, including language, but since my first year, the reality has been that we are sometimes marginalised on

> account of our identities. The reality is that you find no material written by someone like you or in your home language…that is the sad reality we live with. (PhD Student 9)

This was supported by a supervisor who added,

> In these days, when decolonisation has become a buzzword, it is regrettable that our students – Indigenous students – are still excluded linguistically from pursuing postgraduate studies. It is traumatic for a Black child from rural areas, whose native language is isiXhosa, for example, to come here and battle it out academically with their peers. It is unacceptable that English still gets prioritised, and it almost seems like speaking good English is the standard tested – I say this because excellent English speakers understand texts better and express themselves better. I can bluntly say that the system is not designed for Indigenous students to succeed. (Supervisor 1)

Additional insights can be gleaned from a Master's student who said,

> The struggle is real; we tend to spend most of our time trying to understand certain things and work almost twice as much as our colleagues from abroad and those from here but speak English as a home language. A lot of time is wasted trying to rewrite and edit the language to meet the supervisor's readability requirements – online tools like Grammarly have become some go-to tools for helping me and my friends cope. I will not talk about other AI tools that people are now using to help them write well. (Master's Student 7)

A PhD student also added insights on how limited resources in Indigenous South African languages were a significant barrier both because of what that represents and the actual consequences by noting,

> When White scholars dominate the field that you study in, it sends the unfortunate message that this is not for you. For me, it is a form of gatekeeping that we still grapple with because the representation there is undoubtedly of an untransformed field that is difficult for an Indigenous student to traverse. We cannot escape the fact that language is a genuine problem for many students; you suffer and have to do more than a native language speaker. Anything that is learnt in a language other than your own forces you out of your comfort zone – if it were all of us being pushed out of our comfort zones, it would be better. However, it is curiously, the previously disadvantaged Black populations that are being expected to run the extra mile. (PhD student 9)

A Master's student noted similar experiences and highlighted,

> I had a rude awakening when I started my postgraduate research – here, you have to have an excellent command of English. You are suddenly overloaded with theories and arguments that are written in English – I mean proper English, not our version of English [English as a First Additional Language]. Even the supervisor expects you to know your story in English – that means expressing yourself eloquently and with no hiccups. The language of research here just punishes the indigenous students – as a result, people like me generally do not go beyond the first degree. You have to be

> tough to survive, and you need additional support from supervisors to survive. (Master's Student 4)

From the sentiments of a supervisor, one could note that language was a significant challenge that the institution was aware of and was trying to help with, although there remained some significant challenges. The supervisor noted,

> The university recognises that we are a historic institution that mainly services and attracts the rural population – our province is rural. We still face challenges regardless of the centre for language assistance that was set up – they have consultants there, but for students, especially part-time ones, making effective use of the centre is quite challenging. The challenges still persist regardless of the centre's existence – the students complain about failing to read and comprehend articles and struggle with critical writing, which is double jeopardy for Indigenous students. We try our best to help nurture them, but the reality is that we lose a lot of sharp minds – daresay I, the cream of this country's future – on account of language proficiency. (Supervisor 5)

These findings indicate that non-native English-speaking postgraduate students face significant obstacles related to resource accessibility and time management, primarily due to the extra effort required to understand and process academic material in a non-native language. As Mutongoza et al. (2023a) report, Indigenous students who are taught in a language other than their native language often feel marginalised and disadvantaged at the expense of their native English-speaking peers due to the lack of resources in Indigenous languages. Joubert and Sibanda (2022) validate our results here by noting the perpetuation of systemic bias favouring English proficiency while exacerbating the struggles of Indigenous students. The lack of representation and resources in their native languages that the findings report in our study is viewed by Kriekle (2022) and King and Brigham (2022) as a form of academic gatekeeping that makes it harder for Indigenous students to succeed and progress beyond their first degrees. Because English excludes the majority of Black students in South Africa (Ndlangamandla, 2024), it is not surprising that participants noted that they constantly grapple with an 'undeclared additional workload' of trying to attempt and improve their grammar and flow of ideas as was noted in the findings. One can, therefore, concede that despite the institutional efforts to provide language assistance, significant challenges remain, leading to the loss of potential talent due to inadequate language support.

Social and Networking Challenges

Another aspect that became evident from the participants' responses was that non-native English speakers faced significant challenges related to collaborations and networking, primarily due to their lack of confidence due to language barriers and cultural differences in communication. One can consider the views of a Master's student who said,

> I struggle to speak with other students who are not from around here…even lecturers who do not speak my language. The thing is that I was not taught English as a first language, so when I meet someone who cannot understand my own language, it is difficult for me to express myself. I find myself sticking to the people I know, students who speak my language, and even Professors from around. For someone who does not understand me, it certainly looks like I discriminate, but in reality, I am afraid of not being understood. The result is that I rarely benefit from people with

> experiences other than my own. I am better now, but there is still work to be done. (Master's Student 4)

These views were confirmed by a supervisor who argued,

> I always urge my students to interact with people they are not used to, people who have different life experiences, and people who come from backgrounds that are different from them because this helps them to learn more and see the world differently. In most situations, I find that English is usually the barrier, and as a result they shy away and hide themselves, but we always gently push them into interacting and networking. It takes time, but I have found that this always works for me. (Supervisor 3)

A PhD student added their experiences of language as a barrier when it came to collaboration and networking, noting,

> Conferences and academic events are some of the scariest for me. I know that these events are meant to facilitate connections with other authors in the same field, but they are not that easy. I can simply say that if you cannot speak well, chances are that you will struggle to present and respond meaningfully, let alone converse with others. I know many students who would instead not present their work, which in most cases is really good – they fear that their lack of good English will make it look like the work is not theirs… (PhD Student 1)

Another PhD student also revealed that the lack of proficiency in English was significantly hampering peer work and peer support. The student noted,

> Language has the effect of knocking your confidence…I once attended a workshop with some Master's and Doctoral students from other institutions. I really felt looked down on because my English is not that good, as you can tell. I could sense that they were being judgemental and looked at me like they were doubting how I was doing a PhD. My participation in these events is now minimal; I work with other Indigenous students only…and only those who understand that language is not supposed to be seen as a measure of intelligence. I do this for my good – I hate being looked down on. (PhD Student 6)

Similar sentiments were also expressed by another Master's student who revealed,

> When you cannot clearly express your ideas, it is not easy to participate in peer learning activities. My supervisor does these monthly meetings and urges us to exchange each other's work for feedback. When the work is exchanged between two people from different linguistic backgrounds, there are usually problems with understanding and giving feedback. This has helped us be more confident and expressive, but for others who do not have such support, you can imagine how isolated they may quickly become. (Master's Student 2)

The findings reveal that non-native English-speaking postgraduate students face significant challenges in collaborations and networking due to language barriers and cultural differences in communication, which undermine their confidence. The participants' view that they faced difficulties in interacting with peers and lecturers who do not speak their native language,

leading to isolation and missed opportunities for broader academic engagement, is similar to previous studies such as Nasiri and Mafakheri (2015) and Ramchander (2021). As confirmed by Tlali et al. (2022), language barriers often cause students to shy away from diverse interactions. This was validated when participants highlighted the anxiety and avoidance of presenting at conferences due to fears of poor English undermining their work. The work by King and Brigham (2022) is instructional in demonstrating that a lack of language proficiency significantly decreases the potential to seek peer support and collaboration and usually results in social isolation and eventual dropout. This validates the views of participants who revealed that language issues hinder effective participation in peer learning activities, potentially causing non-native speakers to feel excluded and less confident. These experiences underscore the need for more inclusive strategies to support non-native English speakers in academic collaborations and networking.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We set out to explore how proficiency in English influences the academic success of postgraduate research students at a university in South Africa. Our findings revealed three main categories of how language proficiency was influential in postgraduate studies: language and communication challenges, resource and accessibility challenges, and social and networking challenges that restricted the students' progression. Consistent with the call for a transformed higher education landscape, this study demonstrates that universities are not yet as inclusive as they sometimes appear to be because postgraduate experiences somewhat depend on one's ability to express themselves in English fluently. This calls for further efforts towards decolonising postgraduate studies in a way that recognises and dismantles the embedded forms of exclusion. Therefore, to create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment for Indigenous postgraduate students, institutions should provide robust language support services, such as language courses, writing centres, tutoring, and developing multilingual resources. Training programs for staff on cultural sensitivity and effective communication will also be as essential as adopting inclusive pedagogies that respect linguistic and cultural diversity. Universities must also work to review policies to ensure equitable access and offer targeted scholarships and funding to alleviate financial burdens. Facilitating peer networks and mentorship programs can enhance social integration, while counselling services and community-building activities can address emotional and psychological needs.

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