Language in a Life Orientation class: Complexities and contradictions

Jacqueline Lück and Akhona Magxaki

Nelson Mandela University

ABSTRACT

The impact of English as a language of teaching and learning on student access and success at universities in South Africa is well documented. So, too, are the enablements of multilingual strategies and the use of indigenous languages as languages of learning and teaching. The nature of TVET (technical and vocational education and training) student experiences of language is, however, under-researched; hence this article reports on a case study that casts light on such experiences. The case study examined perceptions of student English-language proficiency and the impact of English on student participation and success in Life Orientation, a subject seeking to enhance student academic and life success and resilience. The study found a complex language situation, with poor student performance and English identified as a major barrier. The students did not have English as their mother tongue and rarely spoke it at home, but believed themselves to be proficient in it. Lecturer perceptions of student English-language competence differed markedly from those of the students but also showed contradictory perceptions of student language performance. The students' blind spot about their competencies militated against their success. The study recommends that rethinking equity and social justice in post-school education should include thinking towards more inclusive language policies that better serve a complex multilingual context.

KEYWORDS

English as language of teaching and learning; TVET; Life Orientation; multilingualism; translanguaging; mother-tongue instruction

Introduction

This article is based on a case study that explored lived experiences of language, or language being, in a Life Orientation (LO) class at a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college. It examined the language of teaching and learning and its influence on student success in LO, exploring the role of language in enhancing the equity of outcomes and social justice. Language is an ongoing challenge in a post-school educational context concerned with student epistemic access. The 2015 and 2016 #FeesMustFall student protests called for higher education institutions to interrogate and decentre their north-looking knowledge, including the hegemonic languages of teaching and learning. English remains privileged in the higher education landscape in South Africa, and can be a barrier to access and success. Indigenous languages as language of teaching and learning are largely erased from this landscape – this despite a plethora of research showing the cognitive advantages of mother-tongue instruction, a language policy (DHET, 2002) promoting the use and intellectualisation of indigenous languages as well as the use of multilingual strategies in higher education. A report on the use of African languages as media of instruction in higher education (DHET, 2015) found that, despite the language policy in higher education, English and Afrikaans still predominate as the languages of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the South African Human Rights Commission report (SAHRC, 2016) recommended that higher education institutions review their language policies so as to ascertain whether they are appropriate and practical, and also how they influence institutional culture. A draft revised language policy (DHET, 2018) urged higher education institutions to revise their language policies and attempted to help with this revision through funding models and implementation mechanisms.

The academic outcomes of students who learn through the medium of English but speak it as an additional language are poor (Heugh, Siegruhn & Pluddemann, 1995; Alexander, 2002; Alexander, 2013; Batyi, 2015), and so they contribute to a range of factors that result in systemic educational inequalities.

As cognition best occurs in one's mother tongue, Alexander (2002) and Kaschula (2013) argue for the development of indigenous languages as languages of teaching and learning in higher education. A rethinking of linguistic equity and social justice in post-school education would flow from a critical examination of what is regarded as literacy (especially the reading and writing practices in higher education and the languages in which these occur) and also whose literacy is dominant and whose is marginalised (Street, 2003). Alexander (2002) argues that the development of indigenous languages needs to occur alongside English so as not to deny students workplace and other opportunities. Janks (2009:11) also cautions that access to English in South Africa should be 'tempered by respect for, and maintenance of, students' African languages'. Furthermore, Hibbert & Van der Walt (2014:207) outline a number of multilingual teaching and learning practices by a 'new generation of academics', experimenting with multilingualism strategically to enhance student understanding and academic performance.

Context and rationale

The context for this study is a TVET college in the Eastern Cape. Like other TVET colleges, it performs a vital role for both the private and the public good – giving students the necessary vocational skills to find jobs for private good but also to contribute meaningfully to a post-colonial society for the public good.

Despite these good intentions, concern about the status of TVET colleges is ongoing; accordingly, the general public may continue to view these skills-based colleges as deficient. Furthermore, these students may be particularly at risk of not achieving success, given the nature of their educational backgrounds. This study focuses specifically on Level 2 (first-year) Life Orientation (LO) students in order to consider the effect English has, as the language of teaching and learning, on the academic performance of these students. The term 'language of teaching and learning' will be used in this article in the sense used in the 2018 Draft Language Policy for Higher Education as the language 'used to teach and learn at an educational institution' (DHET, 2018:7). It is a more nuanced and inclusive term because it includes student cognitive processes of acquisition and learning.

LO has come under scrutiny regarding its usefulness and its cognitive value. This article, however, argues that LO is a valuable subject for students at colleges and one that equips them with knowledge to succeed at their studies and in society at large. It should enhance the possibilities of students achieving success in their vocational studies as well as in life (DHET, 2013). LO is a holistic combination of life skills, information and communication technology that cover topics such as personal and career development, health and well-being, citizenship, learning skills, cognitive skills, social and cultural skills, as well as the basic computer applications (DHET, 2013) necessary to adapt, survive, and succeed and live meaningfully in a constantly changing world. LO is therefore important for student understanding and application of the content to their own lives and, in particular, for study success.

This study focuses on LO Level 2, as this is the starting point of the National Certificate (Vocational) (NCV) qualification and comprises students who are new to the TVET sector and faced with unfamiliar subject discourses. Level 2 students may also face language challenges in the classroom. The college, in agreement with all relevant stakeholders, adopted a language policy which states that English will be the principal language for teaching, learning, tests, assignments, examinations and study materials (EMIS Manager, 2015). This assumes that teaching and learning via English will result in epistemic access for students. This occurred despite the Language Policy for Higher Education that promotes multilingualism and indigenous languages (DHET, 2002). At the college, LO lecturers are non-mother-tongue speakers of English, yet they teach through this medium.

There is a disjuncture between the lofty aims of LO outlined above and the pass rates – which have been consistently low over the years at the college. Student pass rates in LO overall were 52.7% in 2013, 45.3% in 2014, and 48.5% in March 2015 (NCV HoD, 2015). A range of

factors may be responsible for this unsatisfactory performance: the college campus is situated in an economically depressed area and is home to previously disadvantaged citizens, the majority of whom speak Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Moreover, the area is characterised by high unemployment, pervasive substance abuse and high levels of violent crime, among other socio-economic problems (REOS, 2013). The context of the campus may also have some bearing on student achievement, as it draws students from the area. But this was not the focus of this particular study; this article probes the role of language only.

In addition to the contextual factors, students registered at the college have diverse home-language backgrounds: 4.3% Afrikaans, 2.8% English and 92.9% isiXhosa, with most of them coming from rural areas in the Eastern Cape (EMIS Manager, 2015). A lack of proficiency in the everyday usage of the English language as well as English as an academic language could be one factor affecting student access to, and participation and success, in LO. And, given their backgrounds, this lack of proficiency could have an impact on the students' confidence, reading fluency and expression in English.

Theoretical framings

This study is framed by theories of mother-tongue instruction, language policy, multilingual strategies and literacy as social practice. The South African educational landscape has been profoundly affected by its colonial legacies of language policy and the continuing dominance of, and high prestige accorded to. English globally. These legacies have led to the hegemony of English in post-school education, with resulting poor outcomes for students with English as an additional language. This situation is being perpetuated post-democracy, despite new language policies and the South African Constitution having bestowed official status on 11 languages.

Alexander (2013:84) states:

> The use of English as a language of tuition at tertiary level because of its *lingua franca* function among intellectuals and its global hegemony is no guarantee of educational equity. First-language speakers and proficient second-language speakers of English will continue to be advantaged *vis-à-vis* all others, that is, the vast majority of tertiary students.

Mother-tongue instruction

The privileged position of English perpetuates the continued existence of an elite group characterised by competencies in English (Granville, Janks, Mphahlele, Reed, Watson, Joseph & Ramani, 1998). While English is a dominant symbolic resource in the linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991), it is the first language of a minority of South Africans.

Mother-tongue instruction is a counter-notion to the power of English. as it has been shown to have positive outcomes for students. First, it affords students opportunities to learn through the

language with which they are most familiar (Senadeera, 2010), that is, the language that they have acquired and use at home (Moyo, 2009). Secondly, it helps to develop confidence, self-esteem and identity in a multicultural society (Senadeera, 2010). Conversely, if students 'are required to acquire an unknown language in an unknown cultural pattern, they are likely to experience anxiety' (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005:74), because language defines identity in fundamental ways (Alexander, 2007). Moreover, unless students are competent in their first language, they will experience cognitive difficulties in their additional language (Owen-Smith, 2010). In the present educational dispensation, however, a student's first language, if not English, is reduced to a subject after a few years of schooling and an 'additional language' (English) becomes the language of teaching and learning. This arrangement results in poor outcomes for both languages. In the present study, the students could have been additionally disadvantaged: 80% of the sample had attended schools in areas designated for black people under the apartheid system (pejoratively known as 'township schools') that largely were poorly resourced and pursued anti-mother-tongue language policies.

Ramani and Joseph (2002:234) caution that African languages should not be developed as languages of teaching and learning without students also being given access to English, which is often viewed as the language of economic opportunity. Alexander (2013) agrees that local languages should be used for teaching fundamental disciplinary concepts while students are simultaneously exposed to a knowledge of English grammar and its registers. The perception that indigenous African languages have low developmental status (Bamgbose, 1991) is often cited as one of the most important obstacles to using indigenous African languages in education. However, the argument that indigenous languages cannot be developed is one that is countered by the many initiatives in higher education that do exactly this in South Africa (Hibbert & Van der Walt, 2014).

Language policy in South Africa

The vexing question is whether enablements of mother-tongue instruction and multilingualism as shown in research have been realised in policy and higher education settings. The Higher Education Act of 1997, the Council on Higher Education Report of 2001, the Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE) and the Ministerial Report for the Development of African Languages as a Medium of Instruction in Higher Education all sought to promote the development of the indigenous languages as media of instruction. Furthermore, section 27(2) of the Higher Education Act of 1997 stipulates that the language policy of a tertiary institution needs to be developed in line with the LPHE. However, 16 years down the line, higher education institutions have been shown to be lethargic in implementing the language policies (DHET, 2018). The new draft language policy (DHET, 2018) now places more pressure on institutions to comply with these imperatives.

Translanguaging

There are differing interpretations of what bilinguals and multilinguals and their teachers do when they use their languages in life and learning. Wei (2017) notes that, when choosing

a theoretical lens, one should ask how this theory poses new and different questions about a current world. The theory that this study has chosen to best understand multilingualism today is translanguaging. This is because translanguaging describes practices and processes where languages are integrated in dynamic ways, moving beyond the linguistics of systems to participatory systems (Wei, 2017). The notion of code has come under scrutiny for its attention to precise linguistic features using a monolingual-bounded language lens, and Wei (2017) argues that, while multilinguals are aware of these linguistic codes, idealised boundaries and language names, they overcome these in their dynamic and fluid naturalised language practices. They are aware of the signifier and signified of the languages they speak and their structural features but use these signs in creative ways to make meaning. He reminds us that, amid notions of linguistic codes and language boundaries, the multilingual origins of languages should not be forgotten.

Code-switching explains what bilingual speakers do when they alternate between two languages they have at their disposable (Bullock & Toribio, 2009). Languages are seen as separate and distinct in their use of correct grammatical forms, that is, are the standard and not the practices in naturalised settings. Code-switching is a teaching and learning practice in the classroom and is included in the concept of translanguaging. Translanguaging, however, goes beyond code-switching. It is a different conceptualisation of what bilinguals and multilinguals do with language naturally in multilingual contexts such as South Africa. Garcia (2009) defines translanguaging as the process by which bilingual students and lecturers engage in complex conversational practices in order to make sense of, and communicate in, multilingual classrooms. It refers to multiple conversational practices as seen from the perspective of speakers themselves (Garcia, 2009) and is the communicative norm of multilingual communities and the simultaneous use of languages in society. It embraces flexibility in language use and the permeability of learning through two or more languages (Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012), and is the fluid movement between languages by students (Garcia, 2009). According to Canagarajah (2011), code-switching treats language alternation as involving bilingual competence and switching between two different systems, while translanguaging treats the languages as part of a single integrated system with multilingual speakers moving between language repertoires in a single integrated system. The languages, varieties, registers and language ideologies of individuals in a multilingual South Africa constitute their linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2017) which they draw on in naturalised meaning-making interactions. These practices have been extended to schools. Code-switching does not account for creative communicative practices where languages are mixed. Scholars are aware that students have spontaneous communicative strategies that they use outside academic contexts, and are considering them for development in academic contexts (Canagarajah, 2011). Batyi's (2015) study is one such instance where successful use was made of translanguaging to help Tourism Studies students master academic discourses via translanguaging in class and online discussions. In the fourth industrial age, multilinguals who translanguage do so in transformative and innovative ways, in the process creating sense and meaning and new language practices that break boundaries with traditional linguistic structures. Translanguaging is a powerful tool for

teachers to draw on, as it foregrounds student agency, identity, and access to disciplinary discourses.

Social turn in linguistics

Linked to language policy and translanguaging are disciplinary discourses and their literacy practices, that is, the reading and writing practices that students need to access. This article argues that mother-tongue instruction and/or translanguaging facilitates such access. These reading and writing practices need to be discipline-specific in order for there to be genuine access and success. A lens such as New Literacy Studies is useful for interrogating the literacy practices students need to demonstrate success in. Its conceptualisations of literacy contributed to the social turn in linguistic theory that sees literacy as a social practice in which multiple literacies exist (Street, 2003). This practice approach means that each discipline has its own reading and writing practices. The role of the lecturer is therefore to ensure that students gain access to the localised academic literacies of the discipline. Students should not only be taught generic universal language 'skills' but should explicitly be taught the reading and writing practices of their discipline.

According to Street (2003), the autonomous model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself will have effects autonomously on other social and cognitive practices. We need to go beyond the universal skills to localised practices to ensure transfer to the discipline. An autonomous model is a skills-based one; it conceals the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin practice and presents literacy as neutral and universal. The alternative model proposed by Street (2003), the ideological model of literacy, offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices, showing how they vary from one context to another. This model has a different premise from that of the autonomous model – and does not consider 'literacy as merely technical and neutral but as a social practice and argues for reading and writing to be addressed as rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being' (Street, 2003:2). Literacy as a social practice is therefore not only about the technical and neutral skill of decoding and encoding words, but also about its embeddedness in the social context (Street, 2003). Literacy practices are shaped by social institutions and are embedded purposefully in cultural practices (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2001).

The LO Level 2 curriculum covers personal and career development, learning skills, health and well-being, and citizenship. Students are encouraged to read about challenges such as poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, unplanned teenage pregnancy, social and environmental injustice in society, environmental challenges, globalisation, and preventable lifestyle diseases such as HIV/AIDS and TB. Students are expected to consolidate in writing their own identities – whether in the form of research projects, tests or assignments as means of assessment. These would be the localised literacy practices of LO in which students would need to demonstrate success.

Methodology

This case study used a mixed-methods approach, that is, both qualitative and quantitative methods, to explore the use, attitude to and perceptions of English among three LO lecturers and 20 Level 2 LO students. The sample constituted 66.2% of a class of 30 LO students who volunteered to be part of the study. Such a small quantitative sample means that the findings cannot be generalised beyond this particular case study. The findings do, however, allude to the complexity of the linguistic context in the TVET sector. Qualitative data were obtained through the use of interviews with lecturers, while quantitative data were obtained through the use of Likert-scale questionnaires presented to students. The data were then analysed using a thematic approach.

The purpose behind a triangulated mixed-methods design was to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem through merging, analysing and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data collected concurrently to strengthen both the qualitative and the quantitative results (Creswell, 2008). Mixed methods, therefore, attempt to understand multiple viewpoints. When used together, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, drawing on the strengths of each (Tashakkori, Teddlie & Teddlie, 1998), and, together, they allow a better understanding of the problem than each approach alone would do (Creswell, 2008). Creswell states that the mixed-methods approach gives a better picture and argument, as it works with more evidence. Mixed methods is thus a rich field for combining narrative and numbers.

In this study, quantitative questionnaires were used to interrogate student proficiency in English and their attitudes to, and experiences of, English as a language of teaching and learning. The questionnaires were in English. Qualitative data from lecturer interviews were used to expand, clarify or corroborate the quantitative data gained from the students. The questionnaire also comprised open-ended questions for students to provide details about their language experiences, so not only hard quantitative data was collected. The qualitative data provided a more nuanced lens on the data provided by the students, as it allowed the researcher to understand, discover and examine more fully the nature of the interactions in multilingual classroom settings.

This study attempted to answer the following main research question: How does English, as a language of teaching and learning, affect the academic performance of LO students in the National Certificate (Vocational) (NCV) Level 2? The themes identified from the main research question, and coded from the interviews and questionnaires, were as follows:

- Language proficiency;
- Student performance in LO;
- The impact of English as the language of teaching and learning;
- Multilingual strategies; and
- Language preferences.

Findings

The findings present responses to the research question on the impact of English as language of teaching and learning on the academic performance of LO Level 2 students.

Language proficiency

Interviews with lecturers

The lecturers were asked about their English-language proficiency in order to ascertain the confidence levels of lecturers in the use of English as language of teaching and learning, and to find out whether English proficiency affected LO teaching. If lecturers were confident teaching through the medium of English, this could help students gain access to the discourse of LO. Two lecturers reported that they had not majored in English but had studied English at tertiary level. They were therefore both comfortable teaching via English as language of teaching and learning: '*I'm pretty comfortable with English*' (Lecturer B) and '*It's much easier teaching in English*' (Lecturer C).

The lecturers were asked if they felt satisfied that all LO content areas were covered and understood by teaching through the medium of English or if any students had missed out on any content. Lecturer B responded that there were aspects that students did not understand and here she translated content to facilitate understanding: '*[If] I felt at the time [students were] missing [something] … we translated*'. Lecturer C started off by saying that she did not feel that she had missed any content, but added '*there are a few things you would like to teach more in your own language just to ensure understanding from the students' side*'. Here, she was seeing that language could be a barrier to student understanding of concepts. Alexander (2013) has argued that a lack of proficiency in English prevents students in higher education from understanding subject content.

When asked about student proficiency in English, the lecturers responded that problems arose when students needed to answer questions: '*The problem comes when they have to reply, when they have to discuss, when they have to express themselves*' (Lecturer B). Lecturer A responded that English '*serves as a language barrier*', as most students were isiXhosa and Afrikaans mother-tongue speakers. Students therefore did not have the proficiency to engage in discussions, although they understood what their lecturers were saying. Lecturer B noted that students regarded English as a formal language only to be used in class or when speaking to a white person. This may also militate against their gaining proficiency in the language.

Questionnaire to students

Student proficiency in, and attitudes to, their mother tongues needed probing, as this was important in a study on the impact of a language of teaching and learning. It could show how perceived proficiencies matched performance as well as the value placed on languages. Student responses to the question of proficiency in their mother tongue (isiXhosa and Afrikaans) were as follows: 14 (70%) students indicated that they could read, write and speak it fluently; 4

(20%) regarded their ability to read, write and speak as average; 1 (5%) considered their ability to be poor; while only 1 (5%) could speak just the mother tongue. These are subjective student opinions and their proficiency levels were not tested in this study.

In response to the question whether it was important for them to learn to read, write and speak well in their mother tongue, the response was 'Yes' for 19 (95%) of the students in contrast to 1 (5%) who said 'No'. Clearly, then, this highlights the fact that the students considered the ability to read, speak and write in their mother tongue to be important. In a similar vein, to the question of whether the students considered it important to learn to read, write and read well in English, 20 (100%) students responded positively.

In response to the question about the areas in which they experienced the most difficulty with English (in LO), 8 (40%) students indicated that they had difficulty speaking the language; 4 (20%) had difficulty reading the language; 4 (20%) experienced difficulty in writing the language; and 3 (15%) had a problem with listening to the language spoken. One participant did not respond to this question. Most students encountered challenges with the practices of English, despite indicating that it was important to have proficiency in the language.

Student performance in Life Orientation

Interviews with lecturers

The focus of this study was to identify the effects of English on the academic performance of students. One way of doing that was to determine lecturer perceptions about the level of student performance in LO. According to Lecturer A, LO comprises two components: Life Skills and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), with Life Skills counting 60% and ICT 40% towards the final mark. Lecturer A stated that students did not perform well in Life Skills. Lecturer B was of the view that student performance overall in LO was poor: '*It is worse in assessments*' and '*they [the students] are good in discussions; they are not as good in assessments*'. Here, Lecturer B contradicted what was previously said about students not being able to express themselves during discussions. This contradiction shows the complexity of language at this college, as even lecturer assessment of student language proficiency is uneven and opaque. It may also be because Lecturer B is comparing assessments with discussions and that student performance in the latter is better. Lecturer C stated '*their [the students'] performance is good*'. This statement was later qualified when Lecturer C noted that students excelled at ICT and not the theoretical aspects of Life Skills.

When asked for reasons for this performance, Lecturer A stated that students could not express themselves in English. Lecturer B indicated an inability to understand questions: *'They misunderstand questions when they are written down and they are not explained properly. You know your students; when you ask a question, you ask it in a way that they will understand and you will put in a little bit of explanation, but when it's assessments and exams, a question is raised and it isn't explained*'. Scaffolding, or the support given to students when learning a new concept (Bruner, 1978), was not present in assessments which were context-reduced, therefore being

cognitively more demanding of students (Cummins, 1984). Finally, Lecturer C was emphatic about the role of English in student performance: '*It does … definitely … play a role.'*

Questionnaire to students

Student responses to the question about their performance in LO were as follows: Of the 20 participants, 3 (15%) indicated that their performance was excellent; 12 (60%) felt that their performance was good; and 5 (25%) indicated that their performance was average. As 15% of the students regarded their performance as excellent and 60% considered their performance as good, and only 25% considered their performance to be average, it can be concluded that the majority of the students (75%) saw themselves as having performed well in LO.

The reasons given were as follows: '*It's because I understand the subject very well and most of the things we talk about in class are the things that go true most of our lives*'; and *'I understand LO because mostly it's what is happening to our lives*'. Student responses appear to be based on the topics covered and on classroom discussion, which may not be cognitively demanding. The nature of the performance may therefore be based on how well they related to the topics and what was discussed in class, not necessarily on their performance in formal assessments. Student perceptions of their performance contradicted those of their lecturers, with the latter basing their perceptions on performance in assessments, not that in class or on real-life applicability.

Impact of English as language of teaching and learning

Interviews with lecturers

The lecturers were asked specifically whether the use of English as language of teaching and learning negatively affected student LO performance, as alluded to above. All three lecturers felt that the academic performance of students was affected, as the students tended to misunderstand assessment and task instructions and questions. Lecturer A reported that '*their answers are irrelevant to questions and then they lose marks*', and that '*students don't perform well, as they don't know how to express themselves in English*'. Lecturer B indicated that students performed better in class discussions than in formal assessments: '*They misunderstand questions when they are written down and they [do not] explain properly.*' Lecturer C confirmed that the students' struggled with English: '*You would get to ask questions in English but when they respond, they respond in Xhosa',* and '*they understand the question but it is the response and also their inability to ask questions should they not understand something*'. The importance of mother tongue, as the language in which students are best able to express cognitive learning, is shown here.

Questionnaire to students

Students were asked if they experienced difficulty understanding English as language of teaching and learning in class, and their responses were as follows: 5 (25%) experienced difficulty; 14 (70%) did not experience any difficulty in understanding English; and 1 (5%) did not respond. If the foregoing statistical representation to this question is anything to go by, then the vast majority of the participants perceived themselves to be comfortable with understanding English. The students may have perceived understanding English as their understanding of lecturer

input and not of their own engagement with content in answering questions and assessments. The data contradict that of the language proficiency findings, where all students indicated that they experienced difficulty with English. However, the students indicated in this section that they were comfortable understanding English when the lecturer explained.

Student responses to the question, 'What effect does English, used as a language of teaching and learning, have on your Life Orientation academic performance?,' were as follows: causes me not to perform well: 3 (10%); improves my performance: 12 (60%); and does not affect my performance: 5 (25%). Given that the lecturers indicated that the students performed below average and that the statistics showed pass rates of below 50%, these student responses could be read as a perception of the importance of English and the aspirational value the language may hold. They did not necessarily reflect what was happening in reality with their assessments.

Student responses to the statement, 'The use of English in Life Orientation causes me great stress', were as follows: strongly disagree: 6 (30%); disagree: 11 (55%); and agree: 3 (15%). This means that 85% of the students in this group did not perceive English to be the cause of stress. This may be as a result of a positive attitude to the acquisition of English and not necessarily of the stress brought on by performance.

To ascertain whether the students had difficulty expressing themselves in English, they had to respond to the following statement: 'I experience difficulty when communicating in English with my lecturer in the LO class.' To this statement, the responses were as follows: strongly disagree: 5 (25%); disagree: 9 (45%); unsure: 2 (10%); and agree: 4 (20%). This means that 70% of students stated that they did not find it difficult to express themselves in English. The perception may be that this refers to speaking only and not writing, as well as to their aspiration to speak well.

To determine student understanding of a predominantly English lecture, they were asked to indicate their responses to the statement: 'I find it difficult to understand Life Orientation when the lecturer mostly uses English.' The student responses were as follows: strongly disagree: 1 (5%); disagree: 11 (55%); unsure: 4 (20%); agree: 3 (15%); and strongly agree: 1 (5%). This 60% response confirms once again previous findings that students perceived themselves as able to understand English as a language of teaching and learning in the LO classroom.

Multilingual strategies

Interviews with lecturers

It was important to find out whether there were any interventions in the classroom intended to improve student performance, and so lecturer opinions were solicited on how they sought to improve English proficiency and whether multilingual teaching strategies were used during teaching and learning. This was especially significant, because many authors have pointed to the impact of English on student performance.

In order to improve English proficiency, Lecturer A responded that they worked in collaboration with English lecturers to focus on '*reading, speaking, writing and interpretation of text*' and that '*students were encouraged to participate in class discussions*'. All three lecturers responded that isiXhosa was used during teaching to help students to understand content. Lecturer A held the strong view that, as English was (and should be) the language of teaching and learning, students needed to show their proficiency by answering in it. Banda (2009) highlights the prevalence of this attitude to English as the language for economic advancement. Despite language in education policies that encourages mother-tongue instruction, many higher education institutions continue to favour English. Lecturer A allowed students to speak their mother tongue, as it made '*it easier for them to [understand] in their own language*'. Lecturer B stated that '*they are allowed to put in their Xhosa. I do allow them to …*'. However, this seemed to be kept to a minimum, as there were both Afrikaans- and isiXhosa-speaking students in the class, according to Lecturer B. Lecturer C's response was that students were allowed to use isiXhosa when discussing content in class, but that they knew that English was the main language. No mention was made of Afrikaans students using their mother tongue in class.

Questionnaire to students

Students were asked to respond to the following statement: 'Speaking in isiXhosa/Afrikaans when discussing content with fellow students in class helps to improve their understanding and performance in Life Orientation.' The students responded as follows: strongly agree: 2 (10%); agree: 11 (55%); disagree: 3 (15%); strongly disagree: 4 (20%). This means that 65% of students saw the value of their mother tongue in their performance.

When asked whether writing their ideas in their mother tongue first would help them do well in their assignments, student responses were as follows: 1 student (5%) strongly disagreed; 6 (30%) disagreed; 3 (15%) were unsure; 4 (20%) agreed; and 6 (30%) strongly agreed. Half of the students therefore saw the writing of ideas in their mother tongue first as a valuable writing strategy.

The students were also asked if they understood content better when the lecturer used both isiXhosa/Afrikaans and English to explain concepts. Students responded in the following manner: 4 (20%) disagreed; 1 (5%) was unsure; 9 (45%) agreed; and 6 (30%) strongly agreed. Once again, 75% of students showed here the significant role played by the lecturer's use of multilingual strategies.

A significant question raised was whether the students felt that English should be replaced with their mother tongue in LO classes. The majority of the students disagreed: 2 (10%) strongly disagreed; 13 (65%) disagreed; 3 (15%) were unsure; and 2 (10%) agreed. Reasons given for their disapproval of replacing English with their mother tongue were: '*It will be difficult to replace English with one's mother tongue because we are different races in the classroom*'; and '*If Xhosa is used, then we will never learn proper English. But Xhosa will help us get good marks*'.

Language preferences

Questionnaire to students

In response to the question, 'Which language did students feel would provide them with better opportunities for a job?', the students responded as follows: 17 (85%) said English, thereby highlighting perceptions of the crucial role of English for the job market; 1 (5%) said isiXhosa; and 2 (10%) said other languages. The majority favoured English, in keeping with general perceptions of English as a global economic language.

When asked if they would like the opportunity to write their assessments in their mother tongue, the students' responses were 10 (50%) 'Yes' and 10 (50%) 'No'. This is quite a significant finding, as it reveals that students have insight into the advantages that their mother tongue could have in respect of their performance. It also indicates student awareness that they may find it easier to write in their mother tongue, although this depends on whether or not they experienced an additive or subtractive language approach in their schooling. If subtractive, they would have competency neither in their mother tongue nor in the language of teaching and learning.

Having discussed the data findings, the focus now turns to the conclusions and recommendations that emanate from the findings.

Conclusions and recommendations

The data reveal the complexities and contradictions of the lived experiences of language, or language being, in the LO class at this TVET college that involve student performance; student and lecturer perceptions of student performance; aspirations regarding the acquisition of English; language ideologies; and student identity. Students perform poorly in LO but believe themselves to be performing well; they value both English and their mother tongue; and they aspire to be better English-speakers while simultaneously regarding English as the preserve of the classroom and of white people. The data are also characterised by contradictory evidence of student proficiencies offered by both students and lecturers. This shows the opaque nature of the language question at the college and the lack of a language of description for the linguistic complexities and contradictions.

In response to the main research question, the findings show that English has a profound impact on student performance. Students have such a positive regard for what the language holds that it blinds them to their struggles with it. Contradictory evidence is offered for their English proficiency because, on the one hand, they indicate their struggles with it and, on the other, claim to understand it well when using it in the LO class and as applied to their lives. The majority of the students did not speak English frequently, nor did they have it as a home language. This mismatch could be because of the high prestige and currency of English in a globalised world: English is regarded as the language of aspiration (Silva, 1997) despite it being spoken by only 9.6% of South Africans as a first language (Statistics SA, 2011). Students at the TVET college in this study have

constructed themselves as proficient in English despite their poor performance. The study did not probe deeply the underlying language ideologies responsible for these perceptions because the focus was on the impact of language on performance. It is, however, assumed that students may be buying into international language discourses that privilege English. It is also highly likely that students may want to escape the servitude, exploitation and oppression of a recent past, where they would have been constructed as a 'dispensable other' (Magubane, 2007:244), and also the social justice gaps that continue in a post-democratic South Africa. The students in this study also indicated their belief that English would provide them with better job opportunities. Mayaba, Ralarala and Angu (2018) refer to the practices in higher education that condition students to believe that English mastery is what is needed to succeed. Monoglossic language ideologies which imply that only an ideal language user has and uses a single language (which is most likely to be English) have been given prominence not only in how South African schooling takes place, but also in how language acquisition and learning are constructed (McKinney, 2017). The mismatch between student and lecturer perceptions of student English proficiency ultimately leads to negative outcomes for students.

Many other factors were responsible for student performance in LO: attitude to the subject, theoretical versus practical components of the subject, and student background. However, English played a significant role in this performance: the evidence shows that students want their English to improve even though they experience challenges with it.

Data contradictions also appear in lecturer conclusions about student English proficiencies, from an initial comment that students do not express themselves well during discussions to a later comment about 'being good' at these. It may be that students did not engage as well as expected in discussions, but that their performance in discussions is better than in their assessments. This may be because of the cognitive academic language required in assessments. The contradictions may also occur because there is no language of description for the nuances of language in the class.

Although the lecturers foregrounded the importance of English, they recognised that it was a barrier to understanding and affected student performance. An analysis of lecturer interviews and student questionnaires revealed that the students were experiencing difficulty speaking, reading and writing in English. The lecturers adapted their teaching strategies by including isiXhosa to facilitate understanding. The data also indicated that the lecturers considered multilingualism to be the most suitable teaching medium or method.

The students indicated that they would prefer to write drafts of their assignments initially in their mother tongue. The findings also suggested that it was necessary for the lecturer to use a variety of multilingual strategies to ensure that the students enjoyed success in an important subject such as LO. The students needed support to facilitate their understanding of assessment instructions and concepts. Moreover, the majority of the students considered themselves to be proficient in their mother tongue and had a positive regard for both their mother tongue and English.

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study makes recommendations regarding the teaching of English to, and the learning of English by, students. These include developing a language of description for language complexities at the college. The language of description could be developed through ongoing conversations about linguistic identities and challenges. This linguistic self-discovery could enhance self-recovery of language. The study also recommends the intentional and structured use of multilingual classroom strategies for students to acquire the ideological literacy practices of LO, and subject–lecturer collaboration with language lecturers. Each context needs an analysis of its complexities for meaningful interventions and so, too, this college needs to analyse its own experiences. This particular LO class was a multilingual one and it was therefore best suited to a multilingual teaching and learning approach. Interventions could have included multilingual strategies such as translanguaging (including code-switching and translating) in group discussions and writing, and multilingual teaching material to better suit this context. Multilingual strategies could enhance the acquisition of languages, including English and mother tongue, and the discourses of their disciplines. Students could be given the option to write assessments in different languages to improve their performance. It also remains to be seen if students are very proficient in isiXhosa or Afrikaans. If, as is suspected, they are not, then multilingual support could enhance their acquisition of all their languages.

Adding to the complexity of the language of teaching and learning was the view held by lecturers that teaching via English was easier, as this was the discourse they as lecturers were used to. They did, however, acknowledge the value of multilingualism. This raises the question of how to prepare lecturers for teaching in multilingual contexts.

The study therefore recommends the development of a bottom-up multilingual language policy at the college to aid the acquisition of subjects such as LO. A bottom-up policy ensures linguistic citizenship (Stroud, 2001) by listening to all the voices of both students and staff in order to explore and resolve linguistic complexities. It would help the college to understand how they got to this place of language, who they are, and how to proceed from it. Such a language policy should seek to develop indigenous languages at the college as languages of teaching and learning, and allow for multilingual strategies to be embedded more deeply into curricula such as that of LO. Moreover, development opportunities should be put in place for lecturers to teach in multilingual contexts, as should forums for ongoing discussion of the dynamics and fluidities of languages at the college and interrogation of the ideological literacy practices of LO. Students also need to be given access to English as part of their linguistic repertoire so as to promote their mobility in an interconnected world. Reconceiving the language of teaching and learning in African post-school education will help mitigate barriers to access and success and so enhance equity and social justice. Doing so will help us to start making sense of the linguistic complexities and contradictions in the post-school sector in critical decolonial ways, and to see and write the stories of our language being.

REFERENCES

Alexander, N. 2002. *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Alexander, N. 2007. The role of African universities in the intellectualisation of African languages. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa,* 5(1):29–44.

Alexander, N. 2013. *Thoughts on the new South Africa.* Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

Bamgbose, A. 1991. *Language and the nation: The language question in sub-Saharan Africa.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Banda, F. 2009. Critical perspectives on language planning and policy in Africa: Accounting for the notion of multilingualism. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics PLUS,* 38:1–11. https://doi.org/10.5842/38-0-50.

Batyi, TT. 2015. Development of a tourism diploma in isiXhosa-speaking students' academic literacies: A multilingual intervention. Unpublished PhD thesis. Port Elizabeth: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

Baynham, M & Prinsloo, M. 2001. New directions in literacy research. *Language and Education,* 15(2&3):83–91.

Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and symbolic power.* Cambridge, A: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, JS. 1978. The role of dialogue in language acquisition. In A Sinclair, RJ Jarvelle & WJM Levelt (Eds). *The child's concept of language.* New York: Springer-Verlag.

Bullock, BE & Toribio, AJ (Eds). 2009. *The Cambridge handbook of linguistics code-switching.* (*Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics)*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Busch, B. 2017. Expanding the notion of the linguistic repertoire: On the concept of *Spracherleben* – The lived experience of language. *Applied Linguistics,* 38(3):340–358.

Canagarajah, S. 2011. Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *The Modern Language Journal,* 95(3):401–417.

Creswell, J. 2008. Mixed methods research design and procedures. Seminar presented at the University of Pretoria, 21 March 2008.

Cummins, J. 1984. *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2002. *Language policy for higher education*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2013. *National Certificate (Vocational) subject guidelines: Life Orientation NQF Level 2.* Pretoria: Government Printer.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2015. A report on the use of African languages as a medium of instruction in higher education. Available at: <http://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/FeesHET/docs/2015-Report-seOfAfricanLanguages-MediumsOfInstruction.pdf> [Accessed: 7 October 2018].

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2018. *Revised draft language policy. A Department of Higher Education and Training policy developed in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act 103 of 1997, as amended).* Pretoria: Government Printer.

EMIS Manager. 2015. Personal communication. Port Elizabeth (PE) TVET College: Dower Campus, 29 May.

García, O. 2009. *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell.

Granville, S, Janks, H, Mphahlele, M, Reed, Y, Watson, P, Joseph, M & Ramani, E. 1998. English with or without g(u)ilt: A position paper on language in education policy for South Africa. *Language in Education,* 12(4):254–272.

Heugh, K, Siegruhn, K & Pluddemann, P (Eds). 1995. *Multilingual education for South Africa*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Hibbert, L & Van der Walt, C (Eds). 2014. *Multilingual universities in South Africa: Reflecting society in higher education Vol. 97*. United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters.

Janks, H. 2009. *Literacy and power*. New York: Routledge.

Kaschula, R. 2013. Multilingual teaching and learning models at South African universities: Opportunities and challenges. Seminar presentation on *Implementation of the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences.* University of KwaZulu-Natal, Vol. 15. Available at: <http://cohtlu.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/Seminars/Kaschula_Seminar_Presentation.sflb.ashx> [Accessed: 12 October 2014].

Lewis, G, Jones, B & Baker, C. 2012. Translanguaging: Developing its conceptualisation and contextualisation. *Educational Research and Evaluation: An International Journal on Theory and Practice,* 18(7):655–670.

Magubane, B. 2007. *Race and the construction of the dispensable other*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

Martin-Jones, M & Jones, K (Eds). 2003. *Multilingual literacies: Comparative perspectives on research and practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin.

Mayaba, NN, Ralarala, MK & Angu, P. 2018. Student voice: Perspectives on language and critical pedagogy in South African higher education. *Educational Research for Social Change,* 7(1): 1–12.

McKinney, C. 2017. *Language and power in post-colonial schooling ideologies in practice.* New York: Routledge.

Menyuk, P & Brisk, M. 2005. *Language development and education: Children with varying language experience.* Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moyo, T. 2009. *Linguistic diversity and development: The language question and social justice in southern Africa.* KwaZulu-Natal: University of Zululand.

NCV Head of Department. 2015. Personal communication. PE College, 29 May.

Owen-Smith, M. 2010. New ideas needed on how language is used in schools. *Sowetan Newspaper,* 18 February 2010. South Africa. Available at: <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/sowetan/archive/2010/02/18/new-ideas-needed-on-how-language-is-used-in-schools?filter=all_comments> [Accessed: 7 May 2014].

Ramani, E & Joseph, M. 2002. Breaking new ground: Introducing an African language as medium of instruction at the University of the North: New developments and research. *Perspectives in Education,* 20(1):233–240.

REOS Institute. 2013. *Live, learn, work, play, pray*. A proposed community project of the Eastern Cape's Northern Areas People's Development Initiative (NAPDI) and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's Centre for Advancement of Non-racialism and Democracy (CANDRAD), based on the Lancaster New City Cavite Project. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/TheNorthStarScenarios/posts/827484430628010> [Accessed: 30 June 2015].

Senadeera, S. 2010. The importance of learning the mother tongue in an adopted country. Available at: <http://www.tamtsydney.com/content/view/122/37/> [Accessed: 24 June 2014].

Silva, P. 1997. South African English: Oppressor or liberator? In H Linguidst, S Klintborg, M Levin & M Estling (Eds). *The major varieties of English*. Papers from MAVEN 97, 79–92. Vaxjo: Vaxjo University Press.

South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). 2016. SAHRC Report on the national hearing on transformation at public universities in South Africa.

Statistics SA. Census 2011. Available at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=3839> [Accessed: 4 October 2018].

Street, B. 2003. What's 'new' in new literacy studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education,* 5(2):77–91. Available at: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/archives/5.2/52street.pdf> [Accessed: 8 September 2018].

Stroud, C. 2001. African mother-tongue programmes and the politics of language: Linguistic citizenship versus linguistic human rights. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,* 22(4):339–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630108666440Tashakkori, A, Teddlie, C & Teddlie, CB. 1998. *Mix methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. California: SAGE.

Wei, L. 2017. Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics,* 39(1):9–30.