Reflections on Decolonising of Medium of Instruction at South African Universities

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ABSTRACT

The 2015/6 #Rhodes Must Fall student protest reignited the debate to decolonise higher education in South Africa and many parts of the world. One way of achieving this is through decolonising the language of teaching and learning to increase access to higher education. Within this caveat, we anticipate that this article will add a crucial contribution to contemporary international and local debates on decolonising the medium of instruction by providing evidence from South African institutions' unique challenges and prospects associated with the quest to deliver quality decolonised education. While tremendous strides have been made in expressing the constitutional right of every learner to receive primary education in a language of their choice, at the university level, the development and implementation of inclusive language policies have been dismal at best. With the demise of the apartheid regime that significantly stifled African languages in South Africa, one could have hoped for changes in attitude and language usage in universities, mainly because universities still have discernible remnants of the apartheid legacy. This article sought to highlight the need for decolonising South African higher education, particularly concerning using English as the medium of instruction. We further hope that this study will benefit practitioners and stakeholders involved in formulating language policies at their respective learning institutions and prompt them to treat the decolonisation process with befitting urgency.

KEYWORDS

Access; decolonisation; home language; medium of instruction; language policy.

INTRODUCTION

The need to decolonise education is an ongoing debate in many parts of the world. In South Africa, the 2015/6 #Rhodes Must Fall student protest reignited the debate to decolonise higher education in South Africa and many parts of the world. This occurred against a background where South African universities have been known to be among the leading institutions on the African continent. Nevertheless, success rates for South African undergraduate students have been worryingly low (Uleanya et al., 2019). Decolonising education entails interrogating the biases and constraints of the current curricula, the gaps in teacher training programmes and the socio-political legacies of colonialism and how they impact education (Nyoni, 2019; Walton, 2018). According to Du Plessis (2021), to decolonise South African universities and schools, there is a need for previously marginalised persons to embrace their cultures and run their institutions based on African values and cultures and not the erstwhile Eurocentric models that the repressive apartheid regime imposed. One of the most central themes in the quest to decolonise education in South Africa has been the debates about the prioritisation of colonial languages, namely English and Afrikaans, as the medium of instruction in universities at the expense of indigenous languages (Vaccaro, 2022). For context, it is essential to highlight that South Africa has twelve (12) official languages, and there has been a wealth of evidence that shows the cognitive benefits of mother tongue instruction and language policies that promote additive bilingual approaches (Madadzhe, 2019; Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022). Nonetheless, South Africa's past of segregation and the prioritising of English and Afrikaans as the major languages of teaching and learning beyond primary schooling complicate the post-apartheid period, especially in light of the constitutional commitment to multilingualism (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). It is not shocking that postcolonial language debates in Africa have generally centred on the efficacy of indigenous language instruction versus the dominance of colonial language in education (Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022).

Several researchers have made a case that the medium of instruction has contributed significantly to the dropout rates in South African universities (Madadzhe, 2019; Magocha et al., 2019). Accordingly, Xulu-Gama & Hadebe (2022) observed that South African Black students' attrition rates tend to be significantly higher than their White peers. This could be because the former use English or Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in many higher education institutions though they are not native speakers of such languages, while the latter use their home languages as the medium of instruction in many higher education institutions as well. As such, Black students' English proficiency is generally regarded as an inhibitor of progress and success in South African higher education institutions because it denies them access to powerful knowledge (Magocha et al., 2019). It is thus not surprising that universities are often required to hold extra lessons and tutorials for such students due to their poor command of the English language (Du Plessis, 2021). Some universities in South Africa have resorted to creating remedial programmes to accommodate such students (Madadzhe, 2019;

Magocha et al., 2019), but because more money is needed to pay the wages of additional staff members and mentors who are involved in leading extra classes or providing supplementary teaching for underperforming students, all of this becomes more expensive for both the institutions and the nation (Heleta, 2016; Zembylas, 2018). Against this background, this article discusses the urgent need to decolonise South African higher education, particularly through the prioritisation of English as a medium of instruction by most institutions.

An Overview of Decolonisation Globally

The agenda to decolonise higher education outside Africa is gaining momentum in various former colonial states, aiming to challenge the Eurocentric dominance in knowledge production and foster inclusivity (Gopal, 2021). In Latin American countries like Argentina and Chile, scholars engage in critical discussions, reevaluating the colonial legacy and promoting the ideals and values of natives and tribal people in education (Cortina et al., 2019; Guzmán Valenzuela, 2021). For example, Brazil has witnessed the emergence of decolonial studies departments in universities, emphasising the contributions of indigenous communities to knowledge and culture (Majee & Ress, 2018). In Southeast Asia, countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are grappling with the effects of colonialism on their education systems and are taking steps to decolonise the curriculum (Yulindrasari & Djoehaeni, 2019). Such efforts include incorporating local histories, cultures and languages into higher education and revising the national curriculum to emphasise indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity (Pols, 2021). Additionally, in countries like India and Pakistan, there is a growing movement to decolonise higher education by reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems and questioning the dominance of Western narratives that have subjugated the academic discourse (Khan, 2023). These diverse contexts highlight the global significance of decolonising higher education to address historical imbalances, promote cultural inclusivity and amplify marginalised voices. The common thread among these movements is recognising the importance of cultural diversity, inclusivity and the revitalisation of marginalised knowledge systems in educational settings.

The notion of decolonisation: An African perspective

It is critical to begin the debate on the decolonisation of education in Africa by reflecting on the argument we perceive to be a central theme in African higher education. Studies reveal that while most African postcolonial universities are substantially composed of African staff, there has been less verve in Africanising their respective curricula, pedagogies and epistemologies (Mamdani, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Seepe, 2017). This draws Afonso-Nhalevilo (2013) to contest the post-independence educational transformation in many African states, which she compares to the panel beating of the colonial education system and which Ansell et al. (2015) call 'changing to remain the same'. Similarly, a damning verdict is proffered by Minga (2021), who argues that Africa has continually operated under a tainted education system since the onset of colonialism. Thus, it is disconcerting that while the central goal of this decolonisation process was the abolition of colonial rule, which was symbolised by independence and the restoration of African agency in the direction-setting of African life on

African territory, the expansively envisaged objective of decolonisation was never fully completed in the majority of Africa (Abímbọ́lá, 2021; Heleta, 2016; Táíwò, 2019).

True educational transformation in Africa should be preceded by robust philosophical considerations to develop a curriculum that addresses the various challenges facing Africans and meets their aspirations. However, Táíwò (2019) is quick to warn us that at a time when Africa needs more robust education on philosophical foundations, most philosophical debates on decolonisation in Africa fail to go beyond a ritualistic denouncement of colonialism. Nevertheless, Enaifoghe (2019) argues that the discussions about the teaching and learning aspects of the Africanisation of higher education in Africa have contributed to a larger conversation about the reconstruction and transformation of African institutions. To many, decolonisation has been viewed as an attempt to undo the untold injustices of colonial eras – essentially, decolonisation in most African states has to do with the revamping of education systems that had been tailored to subjugate and polarise Africans to the benefit of their erstwhile oppressors (Mbembe, 2016; Takayama et al., 2017; Tikly, 2020). The need for the decolonisation of education is thus driven by current inequalities resulting from colonialism's historical power imbalances and legacies. Therefore, decolonising education necessitates acknowledging historically unique colonial power relations and how they persist in contemporary structures, institutions, associations and processes, just like other sectors (Mekoa, 2018; Minga, 2021).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE DIMENSIONS OF DECOLONISATION

It is essential to consider that although education is ideally intended to reduce social injustices and promote democracy, it also functions as a means of perpetuating a specific body of knowledge while marginalising alternative perspectives. Education serves as both a tool for social progress and a mechanism for upholding existing power structures (Botha et al., 2021; McDonnell, 2014). Analysing the historical legacies and prevailing forms of knowledge, and their role in promoting certain groups, nations or cultures at the expense of others, becomes essential in decolonising education. To understand the need for reform in South African higher education institutions that prioritise English as a medium of instruction, it is imperative to review the four dimensions of decolonisation offered by Kessi et al. (2020) – namely the structural, epistemic, personal and relational dimensions. Below, we briefly deliberate on these four dimensions as an attempt to set the scene for the decolonial agenda.

Structural dimension

According to Kessi et al. (2020), decolonisation's structural dimension entails the redistribution and reopening of opportunities and resources that are currently structural, epistemological, personal and relational. Notwithstanding the ongoing strides for transformation globally, the majority of university leadership structures have been dominated by cisgender white males; it is unsurprising that the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa was centred on the struggle for social justice, equity and equality in a bid to right the wrongs associated with the apartheid

regime (Albertus, 2019; Zembylas, 2018). Kessi et al. (2020) reveal that African higher education is currently structured in a way that reproduces and echos colonial relations in aspects such as research funding, professional recognition, gatekeeping of leadership and roles and admission into higher education institutions. Zembylas (2018) also contended that to decolonise structurally, there is a need for the examination of dominant constructions of knowledge and power in such a way that recentres knowledge and power in the intellectual histories of the previously colonised peoples.

Epistemic dimension

Also equally important is the epistemic dimension of decolonisation. Kessi et al. (2020) define epistemic decolonisation as the redemption of worldviews, theories and ways of knowing not grounded in or concerned with Euro-centric theory. Epistemic de-colonialists centre their argument on the perspective that subjectivity, situatedness and positionality are critical. This dimension rejects the superiority of 'civilised' colonialists and neo-colonialists meant to explicitly or implicitly dehumanise and erase African civilisations, culture and way of life (Posholi, 2020; Uleanya et al., 2022; Wood, 2020). For Tobi (2020), a popular reason for the epistemic decolonisation agenda is that colonialism has advanced the epistemic injustice that has seen the engraining of the Eurocentric perspective as epistemically authoritative over many equally legitimate ones. Upon this perspective, various authors argue for the centrality of African languages (as carriers of knowledge) as a medium of instruction in the quest to decolonise African universities (Chimakonam, 2017; Mitova, 2020; Wa Thiong'o, 1998). Thus, epistemic decolonisation could be seen as having the potential for either the end of the anti-colonial fight or the self-discovery of those colonised and oppressed in the past (Matolino, 2020; Kessi et al., 2021).

Personal dimension

The next dimension of decolonisation is the personal dimension which refers to cultivating Afro-consciousness and engaging in non-compliant decolonial praxis (Naidoo et al. 2020, 2019). Kessi et al. (2020) root their discussion of personal decolonisation in the work of liberators like Steve Biko, who sought to fight against all forces that sought to use identities, for example, race and gender, as stamps that mark out subservience. It is common for academics in Africa and other developing contexts to view the pinnacle of academia as becoming more Europeanised – this is demonstrated in the stratification of academic conferences, citation practices, and even the hostile attitudes associated with African journals and publishers (Kessi et al., 2021). In other words, European values and standards of academia often become internalised, leading to deep-seated self-hatred (Moore & Toliver, 2010; Stone, 2017).

Relational dimension

Kessi et al. (2020) define the relational dimension of decolonising as the type of decolonising that acknowledges human agency and interdependence. Proponents of relational decolonisation argue that the relational dimension of decolonising requires people to seek out

the creation of equity and reciprocity that cuts against the status quo of power and privilege (Botha et al., 2021; McDonnell, 2014). The relational dimension necessitates both creating space for and ceding space to scholars from excluded and marginalised communities, whether they have been marginalised due to gendered, racialised, epistemic, religious, ethnolinguistic or embodied hierarchies (Kessi et al., 2020). This proverbial face of decolonisation centres on the interrogation of processes that granted Western epistemologies an unchallengeable status by seeking the end of all types of elitism and dominance in African studies and academia as a whole (Botha et al., 2021; Posholi, 2020). To accomplish this, it is crucial to reassess hierarchies within academic disciplines and methodologies and the prestige associated with publication and "impact" that often benefits elite institutions. It is also necessary to address biases towards urban biases, sexism, homophobia, linguistic hierarchies, the undervaluation of teaching and mentoring, the excessive influence of managerial authority and the unequal emotional and physical burdens imposed by different research agendas and subjectivities. (Mitova, 2020; Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022). In other words, intersectional disparities must be addressed by rigorous decolonial praxis in African Studies.

Prominent benefits of using home language as a medium of instruction

In this section, we advance the argument for home languages as a medium of instruction by exploring the benefits of using home languages. It has been argued that using home languages to explain concepts helps students better understand vexing concepts. According to Bhatti et al. (2018), educators who utilise home languages to supplement explanations of concepts have been known to be more efficient than those who do not. A case can be made for the context of South Africa, where results have amply demonstrated that it is Black students who mostly struggle to succeed at the university level due to their failure to understand concepts when they are explained in English and Afrikaans (Magocha et al., 2019). Students have been known to praise the use of home languages in learning contexts because this gives them a chance to succeed and does away with the unfair advantage wielded by native speakers of English and Afrikaans (Alang & Idris, 2018; Bhatti et al., 2018). In other words, using home languages provides students equal chances and makes assessment more objective (Maluleke, 2019; Manel et al., 2019).

As has already been discussed, South Africa is a multilingual country, and as with any second language speakers elsewhere, a considerable proportion of students lack proficiency in English. Using home languages provides fringe benefits to students and educators who may have difficulties articulating concepts (Karakaya & Dikilitaş, 2020; Mawela & Mahlambi, 2021). Since English is a second language to many, the meanings of concepts often get lost in translation as students attempt to stay abreast with the pressures of academic life at universities, where they are suddenly confronted by a courseload that is taught and assessed in English (Du Plessis, 2021; Madadzhe, 2019; Vaccaro, 2022). To prove the effectiveness of home language instruction, one can consider how teaching strategies such as code-switching and translanguaging have been implemented to help bridge the gap in competence in the

medium of instruction (Galegane, 2020; Lomotey, 2020). Students report that when lecturers use their home languages to explain and teach new concepts, they get more clarity than they would if only the additional language were used (Istifci, 2019; Abdulloh, 2021).

As the calls for inclusive education continue to soar, one must note that the decolonisation of medium instruction is a central theme in promoting inclusivity. Despite the positive developments in South African education, the heritage of apartheid continues to cast a long shadow, resulting in continuing inequality in the face of the goal to open the doors of learning and culture to all (Albertus, 2019; Magocha et al., 2019). The ongoing use of English as a medium of instruction, noble as the reasoning might be, inordinately discriminates against second speakers whose performances are systematically stifled at the hands of their language abilities and not their actual abilities of the subject matter (Madadzhe, 2019; Tobi, 2020). It is thus unsurprising that educators often report that using the home language to explain and clarify confusing topics often makes it easier for learners to grasp concepts as opposed to the constant hammering of concepts in the English language (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018; Cahyani et al., 2018).

Using home languages has also been argued to enhance students' interest. It is imperative to reflect on how language issues have been a source of protest in South Africa, more recently seen in the #AfrikaansMustFall protest – the use of non-African languages is usually met with disdain by students who feel that their languages (and by extension, their cultures) are being systematically alienated at the expense of foreign languages (Vaccaro, 2022). In places where home languages have been integrated into the teaching and learning framework, students are often noted to be more participative and less fearful of little things like failure to pronounce English words (Karakaya & Dikilitaş, 2020; Lomotey, 2020; Muthusamy et al., 2020). This means that with the decolonisation of the medium of instruction, student engagement within university classrooms is argued to increase, thus making the classroom more than just a traditional 'chalk and blackboard' endeavour.

We do not seek to make the exclusive use of English as a medium of instruction an issue that only affects students because doing this would oversimplify the problem. It is essential to acknowledge that with the strides, no matter how small, that have been made to improve access of Black African staff into universities, there is a visible presence of African academics in universities (Moore & Toliver, 2010; Heleta, 2016). The reality is that some of these African lecturers are second speakers of English and face language-related constraints when articulating concepts and delivering lectures effectively. Educators in contexts that are more liberal have been known to use their home languages in explaining and translating concepts that they understand but fail to effectively teach in English (Nurhamidah et al., 2018; Paramesvaran & Lim, 2018). Unsurprisingly, educators are equally noted to be happier and less dreading the prospects of delivering course content where their home languages are respected and utilised (Wang, 2019; Shinga & Pillay, 2021). Thus, why do universities insist on the dominance of the English language despite these and other documented benefits of using

the home language as a medium of instruction? The following section delves into the challenges associated with decolonising the medium of instruction.

The perceived costs of decolonising the medium of instruction

Since decolonising the medium of instruction is concerned with challenging the dominance of colonial languages and promoting the use of indigenous languages in education, this process is not without challenges. Decolonising the medium of instruction requires considerable investment in infrastructure and resources for teaching and learning indigenous languages (Le Grange, 2021; Zawada, 2020). In most postcolonial states, colonial languages continue to dominate the medium of instruction because they are considered more practical for use in the globalised world, as opposed to indigenous languages that do not have sufficient teaching material (Morreira et al., 2020; Walton, 2018). It is thus plausible to argue that decolonising the medium of instruction in higher education institutions is constrained by the limitedness of investment in developing and promoting indigenous languages as viable and effective mediums of teaching.

For decolonisation in higher education institutions to take root, there is a need for concerted collaboration between educators, policymakers and communities, yet studies have consistently revealed that these stakeholders usually disagree (Hayes et al., 2021). In some instances, it is argued that lecturers are sometimes more comfortable teaching in colonial languages such as English and Afrikaans because these are the languages in which they received their training, and they sometimes lack the requisite skills and experience required to use indigenous languages (Brooks et al., 2020; Cahyani et al., 2018). Policymakers at universities and in the political arena are also sometimes reluctant to engender decolonisation of the medium of instruction because of the belief that decolonising the medium of instruction may affect their quest to internationalise their institutions (Hayes et al., 2021; Senekal & Lenz, 2020). It has also been determined that communities are similarly sometimes divided in their views about the importance of indigenous languages in education, thus compounding the challenges of decolonising education (Henderson & Carruthers, 2022). Therefore, for decolonisation to occur, there is a need for a comprehensive approach that involves engaging with all stakeholders and building consensus about the benefits of decolonising the medium of instruction.

To effectively decolonise the medium of instruction, there is a need for time because decolonisation is in itself the product of a long-term sustained commitment to change. As such, for African universities to achieve this, stakeholders must understand that his process cannot be completed through a one-time policy change or a single initiative (Brooks et al., 2020; Dorner & Cervantes-Soon, 2020). Instead, it requires a systemic transformation of the education system that recognises the diversity and richness of linguistic and cultural heritage by providing equal opportunities for all students to learn and succeed (Meda, 2020). Previous studies in this domain argue that such a transformation requires political will, financial

resources and the active involvement of all stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, researchers, communities and students (Du Plessis, 2021; Zawada, 2020).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS A NEW BEGINNING

The decolonisation of the medium of instruction debates in South African universities has been raging for years, with many proponents advocating for a move away from the historical domination of the colonial languages, namely Afrikaans and English. With this in mind, we argue that the way forward requires a multi-pronged approach to decolonising the medium of instruction. Chiefly, there is an urgent need for the recognition of the cultural and linguistic diversity of South Africa and a purposeful recognition that this diversity needs to be reflected in the medium of instruction in higher education institutions. This will require the development of a range of alternative language options that reflect the indigenous outlook of South African universities and significant investment in the drive towards achieving this. Furthermore, there needs to be a commitment to decolonising the content of South African university curricula to reflect diverse perspectives – this may be achieved through an audit of the current content. Ultimately, the successful decolonisation of the medium of instruction in South African universities will require ongoing dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders, including students, academics and political players.

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