

BEING MONOLINGUAL IN A MULTILINGUAL SPACE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: January 2025 Revised: May 2025 Published: July 2025	<i>This study aims to explore the challenges of being monolingual in multilingual spaces, regardless of which language is an individual's home language. The study focuses on South African educational institutions. South Africa is a multilingual country with a monolingual history. During the apartheid era in South Africa, Afrikaans was imposed as the official language; post-apartheid, English is the dominant language in the country. This is problematic because South Africa is a diverse country with 12 official languages, yet monolingualism still prevails, causing language barriers in different spaces. The study utilises a qualitative, autoethnographic approach to describe lived experiences of monolingualism. It contributes to understanding how monolingual policies in educational spaces affect the students directly. There is very little research about the monolingualistic perceptions of students studying in multilingual contexts. Thus, this study examines the autoethnographic experiences of two educational contexts, secondary school and university, through the eyes of the first author. Thematic analysis is used to analyse these experiences regarding the challenges of monolingualism and the need for multilingualism in a diverse context. Findings show that monolingualism causes barriers to communication and affects students' academic success. They struggle to navigate through educational spaces where the medium of instruction is a language other than their home language. They are limited in their interactions when they cannot speak the language being used. A diverse educational space needs multilingualism to benefit individuals, academically and socially. This has implications for educational policies and practices. In order to help students benefit from their educational experience and to prepare them for a multilingual society, focused attention should be given to inclusive language policies and the implementation thereof. In addition, there is a dire need to change negative language attitudes, since positive language attitudes promote multilingualism.</i>
Keywords Monolingualism; Multilingualism; Academic success; Language policy; Educational institutions;	
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INTRODUCTION

The study explores the challenges of monolingualism experienced by individuals in a multilingual context. It focuses on the educational experiences of being monolingual in a multilingual country, namely South Africa through the autoethnographic account of the first author. It examines the challenges that monolingual individuals encounter in academic spheres. Many studies focus on the importance of multilingualism in today's globalised context (Hofer & Jessner, 2025; Veliz & Chen, 2024). However, research is deficient on the lived experiences of monolingual individuals living in multilingual contexts. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the challenges of being monolingual in South Africa's educational spaces of secondary school and university through the autoethnographic experiences of the first author.

It further discusses how the lack of multilingualism affects students' academic performance and social interaction negatively and how multilingualism can assist in addressing inequalities.

Language is an essential part of our identity. It is through language that we communicate our thoughts and express our identities, values and cultures (Rovira, 2008). Language helps us to build relationships and participate in society. It is central to conveying information and fundamental to learning and teaching (Wyse et al., 2017). Language and interaction are prerequisites for access and success in education and literacy. "Deep-rooted social inequality, increasing diversity, and the need to implement inclusive policies and classroom practices are some of the most pressing challenges facing education systems in the 21st Century. Language plays a crucial role in current attempts to address these intersecting challenges" (UNESCO, 2024, p. 2).

South Africa has two colonial languages, Afrikaans, derived from Dutch and English. "African children were forced to learn half their subjects through the medium of Dutch and half their subjects through the medium of English, a language in which neither they nor their teachers were adequately fluent" (Janks, 2010, p. 11). African languages spoken by at least 80% of the population were overlooked (Alexander, 2024). While currently a democratic society, African learners' learning and sense of identity are still at risk when they face learning in a language other than their language. Although South Africa has twelve official languages, English is considered the language of access and power. According to Janks (2010), ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity is not limited to South Africa; it can be found across the world. This sentiment is echoed by Marácz and Adamo (2017). They believe that, despite the recognition of linguistic diversity by many globalised societies, there is still a lack of equality among different languages in the public and educational spheres. This has implications for the economic and social inclusion of marginalised language speakers. We need to recognise linguistic diversity as a basis of creativity and cognition and to adopt inclusive language policies in education. In addition, students' prior knowledge needs to be taken into account. Slaughter and Cross (2021, p. 41) argue that "students' existing communicative repertoires" are a rich resource to support new language development.

An inclusive language policy would mean benefiting from society's linguistic diversity and incorporating multiple languages into the curriculum. This would enhance the learners' linguistic repertoires and empower them to use languages for learning and social participation (UNESCO, 2024). As a free country, South Africa strives to ensure social justice for all. According to Osborn (2006), the unbiased division of social power and advantages in a society can be seen as social justice. Establishing social justice in education includes inclusivity and equal opportunities for all. This study highlights the importance of multilingualism to achieve social justice in basic and higher educational institutions (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2009).

This study aims to answer the following questions: How does a monolingual individual navigate through educational spaces in a multilingual society? And how does instruction in a language different to the students' first language affect their academic journey?

Literature Review

South Africa, a Multilingual and Multicultural Country

South Africa is a multilingual country characterised by an incredible diversity of cultures, races, ethnic groups, languages, and terrains and sporting a diverse language policy (Abongdia, 2014). South Africa is rich in its 12 official languages but despite this wide variety, English is the widespread official language in South Africa (Dyers, 2008). This does not mean the language is inclusive to all learners or students, who come from diverse backgrounds. Hence, there are limitations for monolingual individuals and educational institutions in a multilingual South Africa.

Racial Segregation and Racial Stratification

South Africa today is viewed as a democratic country where all citizens have equal rights and autonomy. However, in the apartheid era, South Africa was not a country where freedom was a guaranteed right to citizens of colour. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word which directly translates to English as “apartness”. The Afrikaner nationalists, who ruled South Africa and the government from 1948 until 1994, instilled laws to separate citizens from one another according to their skin colour. Citizens were categorised into white, black, coloured, and Indian groups, and roles and opportunities were assigned accordingly, which is called racial stratification. As a system, racial stratification promotes organised inequality, with only the favoured ethnic group granted access to scarce and desired resources, in this case, the community of white citizens (Verdugo, 2008). These racial groups were separated and placed in a system per hierarchy, with the Afrikaner nationalists viewing the white citizens as superior.

These racial segregations promoted separation even in languages, ensuring that people of South Africa were separated in their daily lives. The indigenous language divisions became part of the policy to divide and rule the black people in the country (Abongdia, 2014; Marjorie, 2010). Since people of different races did not interact, no individual could learn any other language besides the imposed language and their mother tongue. The apartheid government allowed access to the best facilities and services only to whites. At the same time, citizens of the country regarded as inferior were rendered oppression of different kinds, including restriction of necessary services like adequate education and employment opportunities.

The Language of Ruling in the Apartheid Era

In the apartheid era, Afrikaans was the language dominantly spoken and imposed on the citizens of South Africa. The Nationalist Party that ruled the country had Afrikaner members (people who spoke Afrikaans), so they imposed Afrikaans on everyone else. The apartheid government favoured a completely monolingual South Africa because they had a monolingual mindset and believed that Afrikaans was the superior language.

Bantu Education

The Afrikaans language was even imposed in the education sector. Such oppression and imposition gave rise to Bantu Education, which the Nationalist Party implemented in 1954 as a strategy for the dehumanising policy of their apartheid government. According to Bauer (2020), Bantu Education was developed by the apartheid government specifically for the black community, stating that all black students were only permitted to attend government schools. It intended to train black students for labour-intensive and tedious jobs that the government deemed appropriate for their race. Therefore, they were denied receiving the same syllabus as the other racial groups, and it was aimed at black students believing and accepting their being subservient to white South Africans.

The notion is supported by Luthuli (2006, p.35), that Bantu Education solely isolated black South Africans, convincing them of their permanent inferiority. Alexander (2021) states that, although black students were never satisfied with Bantu Education owing to the bleak and meaningless future it would grant them, nothing infuriated the students more than when the government planned to present Afrikaans as the language of teaching. That brought about the Soweto uprising, when students protested against this system of education.

A Democratic South Africa

In 1994, democratic elections were held in South Africa, and every legal citizen was granted the right to vote for a government of their choice for the first time. For this milestone to be reached, the country's citizens fought a long and hard battle against the oppressors, and many lives were lost in order to obtain independence and democracy, which everyone is granted today. The elections resulted in the African National Congress (ANC) being the ruling party, and Nelson Mandela was elected as the first black democratic president of South Africa.

In keeping with the transformative spirit of a democratic government, the language in education policy was developed in 1997, based on the South African Constitution of 1996.

In terms of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the government, and thus the Department of Education, recognises that our cultural diversity is a valuable national asset and hence is tasked, amongst other things, to promote multilingualism, the development of the official languages, and respect for all languages used in the country, including South African Sign Language and the languages referred to in the South African Constitution (Department of Education 1997, p. 1).

The South African Constitution assures individuals of the right to receive education in the official language of their preference, where practicable (South African Government, 2024). Hence, we can speak about multilingualism in South Africa today. In total, 12 South African languages have been made official. These languages are isiXhosa, Sepedi, Sesotho, Afrikaans, isiNdebele, English, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiZulu and sign language. Accepting all 12 official languages gives the realisation that South Africa supports that a monolingual mindset is not acceptable here since everyone is guaranteed the right to interact with any language in the way they see fit, since South Africa is a democratic, diverse country.

The Dominance of the English Language

Although all 12 languages were promoted in the country's official language policy, English is still the lingua franca. It is the language of power (Davis, 2024). English is used predominantly in all sectors of society, including government, education, business, media and arts. English is also the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) used in schools from Grade 4 onwards (Crystal, 2003). Instruction in the mother tongue is offered in most schools from Grades 1–3. However, many schools have English as the LoLT from Grade 1 (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016).

According to Cowling (2023), English is spoken in South African homes by 8,1% and by 16,6% of individuals outside their homes. Afrikaans is spoken in South African households by 12,2% and by 9,7% of individuals outside their households. The African language, isiZulu, is spoken in South African households by 25,3% and by 25,1% of individuals outside their households. Another African language is isiXhosa, which is spoken by 12,8% of people outside their homes and by 14,8% of individuals in their homes. While isiZulu is the most common language spoken both within and outside of homes, English is the second most prevalent language spoken outside households. Only a small number of people speak it in their homes. IsiXhosa is the second most common language spoken within and the third most common language spoken outside of homes.

This means that English is being imposed on all South African residents in the belief that it forms unity and allows communication for every ethnic group. English is also considered the gateway to economic advantages. In a country with a colonial history, diverse languages and limited proficiency in English, the prevalence of English is a problem (Davis, 2024). This raises the question: Is the democratic government still practising apartheid in a somewhat different form? Although its use is hegemonically accepted by most, the dominant use of English still disregards the first languages of many individuals, especially when they are interacting in diverse spaces.

Challenges of Monolingualism

Clyne (2004) states that a person with a monolingual mindset views the world through one linguistic lens and they see monolingualism as the norm. However, monolingualism can restrict an individual's ability in contexts where another language is used (Ellis, 2006). Monolingualism could be favourable to those whose first or home language is the language of instruction. However, it is unfair to those who speak a language other than the language of learning and teaching. In a multilingual country like South Africa, monolingualism does not afford equal opportunity to the speakers of a language different from the language of

instruction. At the same time, monolingual speakers may also find it difficult to function effectively in multilingual surroundings.

Learners who are not English home language speakers are disadvantaged when they encounter it as the language of instruction (Abdulatief et al., 2021). The poor throughput rate indicates that using English as the language of learning and teaching for diverse mother tongue learners is a contributing factor (Bergbauer et al., 2016). Recent research suggests that learners can learn more effectively if they learn in their mother tongue. A second language is acquired more quickly if they have a strong base in their mother tongue (Foley, 2010).

Being monolingual can have some advantages if a learner attends a school that educates them in the only language they know and understand. Therefore, the learner or student can excel in their academics, since they understand the language utilised to deliver the content being taught and would be able to express themselves and their perspectives fully. However, Clyne (2004, p. 40) explains that it is an “unfair advantage” to study in a language of your home background, especially when the language is also the lingua franca known in the country.

Disadvantages of Monolingualism

English is the language that is mainly used to communicate in academic environments in South Africa. Monolingual learners in English are automatically advantaged against those whose home languages vary. These learners are already learning in a language they acquired fully at home and in their immediate environments. According to Pennycook (1994), monolingual English speakers view English as beneficial. They believe their language is the natural language and that everyone else must adjust to it. Abdulatief et al. (2021) point out students’ negative attitudes towards their home languages and their preference for studying in English owing to its perceived social and economic advantages.

Even though English is the language used in media politics, economics and business (Beukes, 2003), Kirkpatrick (2000) and Mughan (1999) argue that English is not sufficient and that a monolingual English speaker might be disadvantaged in a diverse job market. This means that growing up with a monolingual mindset, even for first-hand English speakers, will disadvantage the learner or student in the future. According to Peel (2001), not knowing different languages hinders any language speaker at a deeper level from understanding the next person who speaks another language. Monolingualism illustrates individuals appearing inadequate owing to having one linguistic code and limits the presence of other bilinguals. According to Lafon:

The command of the MoI (medium of instruction) is linked to cognitive development and has implications for the acquisition of knowledge. If learners do not have sufficient academic proficiency in the MoI, they often have problems in learning. This is not necessarily because they do not understand concepts or ideas but because they fail to grasp their linguistic representation. (2009, p.12)

Heugh et al. (2019) similarly assert that learners may understand English through saying a few sentences in English. However, they need help understanding what they are reading, especially in challenging subjects like mathematics and science. Thus, they will need help to learn the information required by the school curriculum. Consequently, parents and teachers are disappointed with their results. It is not the students who fail. “Rather, it is the education system that fails students. Students cannot learn what they cannot understand” (Heugh et al., 2019, p. 9).

Benefits of Multilingualism

Multilingualism is defined as the ability of an individual to use more than two languages successfully (Aronin & Singleton 2012; Baranova et al. 2021). Multilingualism includes a variety of language settings and traditions. We are living in an interconnected world where multilingualism has become inevitable. It enables us to access diverse perspectives and facilitates communication and collaboration across cultures. “As globalization breaks down

geographical barriers and fosters cultural exchanges, individuals and communities are now more likely than ever to engage in multilingual interactions” (Aminova, 2024, p. 279).

Similarly, Hofer and Jessner (2025) assert that multilingualism has become a core competence, a valuable intellectual and socioeconomic resource and a requirement in a rapidly transforming global society. Education systems are witnessing a huge increase in learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, necessitating the adoption of multilingualism. With 12 official languages, South Africa’s linguistic diversity is an important aspect of its identity. South Africa’s diverse language landscape provides and advantages its citizens with the possibility to embrace multilingualism successfully. Multilingualism is needed to allow individuals to navigate different spaces effortlessly and to communicate effectively with each other. This supports Miller (2012), who states that a change in language code is required in different settings, since this is necessary to be able to communicate with others successfully.

Kramsch (2008) affirms that multilingualism assists an individual to use various linguistic codes where necessary, irrespective of the person’s not being entirely proficient in the other languages. By engaging with multiple language systems, learners experience important changes at the level of (meta)cognition and (language) processing, attitude and outlook. These changes are reflected in their positive approaches to languages (Hofer & Jessner, 2025; Jessner, 2023). Multilingualism carries cognitive benefits and promotes creativity and linguistic agency (Heugh, 2002). Enhanced metacognitive capacity benefits an individual’s academic performance (Schroeder et al., 2021). According to De Courcy et al. (2008), the performance of multilingual learners improves more in cognitive and linguistic assessments than monolingual learners whose vocabulary consists of only one repertoire. In their study, Bialystok et al. (2006, p. 459) examined “the effect of lifelong bilingualism on maintaining cognitive functioning and delaying the onset of symptoms of dementia in old age” and found that the bilingual participants “exhibited a delay of 4.1 years in the onset of symptoms of dementia in comparison to monolinguals.”

Unfortunately, with English being regarded as the *lingua franca*, combined with top-down language in education policies, curriculum pressures and negative attitudes of both parents and learners towards other languages, a vicious cycle exists which perpetuates the hegemony of English (Veliz & Chen, 2024). In addition, monolingual language policies discriminate among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and deter them from utilising their languages to access educational benefits (Nyimbili & Mwanza, 2021).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to collect and analyse data. McLeod (2019) states that qualitative research involves collecting, analysing, and interpreting non-numerical data, such as language. Qualitative research studies individuals in their natural settings to understand their social reality. Pathak et al. (2013, p. 192) elaborate further that the “qualitative method is used to understand people’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions.”

For data collection, the study relies on autoethnography. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method, which “uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”)” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is permeated with political and cultural aspirations and they engage rigorously in self-reflection, also called “reflexivity”, in order to identify and examine the connections between the self and the social life.

According to Ngunjiri et al. (2010, p. 2), “autoethnography takes a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation about self and social phenomena involving self.” The objective of the study is to outline the challenges of monolingualism in multilingual spaces. This would entail describing the lived experience in these spaces. Considering what has been

said, it is logical that a qualitative, autoethnographic research method is suitable for this study, as it assists in highlighting the personal experiences of the challenges of being monolingual.

The first author was a 20-year-old postgraduate student in the Department of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Nelson Mandela University (at the time of writing this paper). An Afrikaans mother language speaker, she studied in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa. These provinces are characterised by Afrikaans and isiXhosa as dominant languages. Her struggles with language barriers at secondary and tertiary levels inspired her to conduct this study.

Data Analysis

The non-numerical, autoethnographic data were analysed using thematic analysis in light of the research questions and literature review on monolingualism and multilingualism. First, the authors familiarised themselves with the recorded observations. Then the data were coded manually in relation to the topic. For example, Afrikaans mother tongue, mother tongue education, language advantage, assessments, extracurricular activities, language policy, language of instruction, multilingualism, and so on. These codes were then categorised into themes, according to the research questions. These themes were analysed, forming the findings of the study.

The findings are presented as a thematic analysis of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in data. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis is flexible and is not bound by any specific epistemological perspectives. This study identified and interpreted patterns in the data collected from the author's own experiences, using the lens of existing literature. The thematic analysis did not focus just on describing the themes; these were interpreted and explained in line with the objectives of the study. The findings were further explained to find solutions to how multilingualism can assist with the problem of monolingualism in multilingual spaces.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Secondary School Experiences

The first author of this study comes from a school where Afrikaans was the LoLT and English was taught as an additional language. The process of learning a different language was a challenge, as the author was a monolingual of the Afrikaans language. Thus, as a learner, the author also had an "unfair advantage" (Clyne, 2004, p. 40) against those whose mother tongue was not Afrikaans. The author could express herself in class interactions and answering tests and examination papers. Therefore, the author barely experienced any challenges of being monolingual in academics until she had to study or communicate in English. She experienced both advantage and disadvantage being a monolingual in Afrikaans language.

The author was later admitted to a university that used a different language as a medium of communication, in this case, English. Thus, she experienced monolingual education at her school and at the university. While she gained from one experience, she was deficient in the other. The only language the author knew well was Afrikaans, and she was thus lacking in the English classroom. As a learner, the author could not express herself in the classroom, and being monolingual limited her interaction.

Being monolingual also limits an individual's cognitive potential (Khan, 2011; Lafon, 2009). The author was a leader at her school and had to represent the school at public school events. Since English was the lingua franca, the events used English as the medium of communication, and the author could not express her perspective on some topics effectively. The author missed opportunities owing to being monolingual because she lacked the confidence to engage in events of this nature. As Coulmas (2007) argues, a person's thoughts mean nothing if they cannot express them in the language they are used to in a specific space.

Monolingual Experiences

A monolingual individual is only able to converse in one single language. Clyne (2004) asserts that monolinguals view everything in a single language. The author of this study was a monolingual at school and only knew the Afrikaans language. The author thus viewed everything in Afrikaans. Since Afrikaans is the author's native language and could assist her in expressing herself fully in communication with another Afrikaans speaker, the language should not be disregarded. However, as a South African citizen, it is problematic owing to linguistic diversity in the country. South Africa is a diverse country. Acquiring and learning only one language can have adverse outcomes in different spaces.

Despite receiving education in the home language, the author's monolingualism posed various challenges. According to the South African Constitution of 1996 (South African Government, 2024), learners must choose up to a minimum of two language subjects. Thus, the author had to study English as a first additional language at school. Being monolingual in Afrikaans challenged the author's cognitive and communicative skills (Ellis, 2008). The author needed help to understand the content of the work correctly and in communicating her perspective of the work effectively. Second, the author experienced the affective filter (Krashen (1982), as she was not confident about interacting in inter-school opportunities. Therefore, monolingualism resulted in the author losing opportunities, as she could not express her thoughts adequately in the language used in a specific setting (Coulmas, 2007).

The Language Policy of the Secondary School

The language policy of the author's school which is written in Afrikaans, states that the school is an Afrikaans medium school and that all education will be conducted and received in Afrikaans, except English, which is the only additional language. According to Article 29 of the 1996 Constitution of South Africa (South African Government, 2024), any learner or student has the right to receive academic content in any of the official languages of their choice. In this regard, the school's language policy mentions that any learner who chooses to apply to the school and may experience difficulties with the Afrikaans language/will be referred accordingly to a different school.

Although this secondary school's language policy was not developed to disadvantage the Afrikaans medium students, promoting monolingualism at the risk of neglecting other languages in South Africa has an enormous negative impact on their students' post-high-school experiences. It affects the future of those who desire to exist and pursue education in diverse universities and multilingual spaces. The author is an example of the students who struggled or are struggling to converse and exist entirely in multilingual spaces owing to the monolingual medium of instruction (Heugh et al., 2019). The culture shock that strikes these students owing to exposure to a diverse space is inexplicable, since these students only know a single language with which to express themselves. These students struggle to engage with others and face difficulties completing their academic commitments since they are only familiar with writing everything in Afrikaans. This change and difficulty in transitioning fully to multilingual spaces like universities hinder the students from exercising their linguistic rights, rendering them at a disadvantage, especially in academics.

Higher Education – University Experiences

Later, the author furthered her studies and realised that the university space is English, the language the author struggled to acquire at school. Thus, the author experienced more challenges. English is a dominant language in South Africa, and every individual is thus motivated to acquire and learn the language. In addition to the hegemony of English as a global language, in their study, Ngcobo and Barnes (2024, p. 93) found that students were reluctant to study in English because they "generally do not have confidence in the possibility of developing their languages to a level where they could be on a par with English." Students

whose home language is English are inevitably advantaged against those with different home languages. Thus, individuals think knowing English benefits them in every environment (Pennycook, 1994).

Kirkpatrick (2000), and Mughan (1999) argue that English is insufficient and that a monolingual English speaker might be disadvantaged in the job market. The language requirements for job vacancies can include languages other than English, depending on their customer base. The author concurs because she did not experience English as the dominant language in her interactions outside the lecture hall in the university.

Monolingual Experiences at the University

Students from various places with different language backgrounds came together at the university, and those who knew more than one language could switch from one language to another, depending on those with whom they were communicating. Monolinguals could not practise that ability, resulting in their not participating in activities beyond the classroom.

The author of this study found that monolingualism is a problem as it restricts individuals from navigating different spaces, and they do not have adequate language repertoires needed to express themselves completely (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). The author of this study struggled academically because the language medium used to teach and communicate at university was English, in contrast to her school experience. The author also struggled to participate fully at university and was not prepared for society, since the challenges of being monolingual in a diverse South Africa were problematic and restrictive.

The Language Policy of the University

The university's language policy aims to be consistent with the university's vision, mission and values statement. According to this language policy, the university's official languages are English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa, and its corporate image must reflect this linguistic identity. This language policy also states that these three languages promote equal access to knowledge by providing for the development of multilingual skills and that all staff and students are encouraged to commit to multilingualism. It is further mentioned that, although the university has three main languages, English is the medium of communication between the staff and students for diverse language speakers. Although the university is working progressively towards incorporating multilingualism in its learning and teaching, the challenges of multilingual content and trained teachers persist.

The Language of Communication

English is the main language of communication between university staff and students, which is unfavourable to those who struggle to use it (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). This leads to feelings of inferiority in the presence of those who can speak English fluently.

The University's Open Days

The university open days are meant to induct all students into the university, its societies, and every facility it offers. All of the open days offered at the university are conducted primarily in English. Monolingual students are discouraged from attending the open days because they realise that the language they are not proficient in is the language that is dominant in communication.

The Application Process

The university application process is available in English only and can be strenuous and challenging to follow and complete for monolingual learners who are not proficient in English.

The Registration Process

The registration process is made easier for students who complete the application successfully and are accepted to the university. The university employs a diverse group of

students already in the university to assist first-year students with registration. The entire process is meant not to disadvantage any student academically. If the student finds a student leader who shares the same language, the registration process becomes easier for the student even though everything is still only offered in English.

The Learning Environment and the University Environment

The teaching is conducted in English, as the language policy states, unless a student registers for a module in Afrikaans or isiXhosa. Otherwise, all modules are delivered and taught in English. Non-mother tongue speakers of the English language, like the author, experience challenges during lectures (Ngcobo & Barnes, 2024). They struggle to write assignments and tests because their English is not standardised, and all these factors disadvantage these students significantly, especially in assessments.

Having the language of formal communication and instruction as English is a major challenge to monolingual students who are not English speakers because it limits them from participating fully in university activities, as they often become intimidated by the language with which they struggle (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). Through seeing different races and interacting with different people, students realise that university is diverse. That is when they understand that everyone speaks a different language. If only most had multilingual skills, then existing and communicating in the university space would be more effective. These findings are depicted in Table 1:

Table 1
Language Experiences of the First Author at Secondary School and Tertiary Levels

Secondary School Experience	University Experience
Language of learning and teaching (LoLT).– Afrikaans	Language of learning and teaching (LoLT) – English
Afrikaans – author’s first language	English – author’s second language
Advantage in understanding classroom teaching.	Disadvantage in understanding classroom teaching.
Advantage in assessments	Disadvantage in assessments
Advantage in communicating in the classroom and with those speaking the same language.	Disadvantage in communicating with speakers of languages other than Afrikaans within and outside the classroom.
Disadvantage when learning in another language	Disadvantage from participating in university activities, especially the admission process
Disadvantage in participating in extracurricular activities with other schools	
Being monolingual limited multilingual speakers to using only one language to include her in their conversation	Multilingualism required for greater social cohesion
School language policy – Afrikaans medium school	University language policy – multilingual but limited mostly to English
Limits students from participating in a multilingual environment in a diverse country	Limits students from participating in a multilingual environment in a diverse country.

These experiences answer the research questions of how monolingual individuals navigate through educational spaces in multilingual environments and how monolingualism affects their academic progress. If the language of learning and teaching is the same as their first language, they are at an advantage. On the other hand, if the language of learning and teaching is not their first language, they are at a considerable disadvantage. Furthermore, to socialise in these spaces, one needs to know more than one language. The findings also confirm

that multilingualism cannot be avoided in a country defined by diversity. Instead of considering multilingualism a barrier, curriculum and language policy developers should regard it as an asset by recognising students' diverse linguistic repertoires (Aminova, 2024). Inclusive pedagogy would result in enriching academic experiences for marginalised students.

CONCLUSION

Being a monolingual leads to a loss of opportunities and benefits which require multilingualism. Monolingualism also limits some individuals from interacting with the rest of society, while multilingualism can assist with that. A monolingual's interaction with others does not only go as far as a single institution. At some point, a person might have to move from one space to the next, where neither of the two languages someone is acquainted with will be the medium of communication. Multilingualism can benefit South African individuals for various reasons, including access to and success in education and the broader society. Moreover, multilingualism carries cognitive benefits. Multilingualism promotes respect for and equality in a post-colonial, fractured society like South Africa. Affording individuals the opportunity to study in their mother while encouraging other languages is beneficial for academic performance.

The aim of the study was to explore the challenges of being monolingual in a multilingual educational space. The unique contribution of this study to the field of monolingual challenges is the first author's lived experience in different educational settings, where she experienced both the advantages and disadvantages of her single language proficiency. Her privilege of speaking the LoLT at secondary level was not without language problems. These became heightened once she joined higher education where the language of instruction was not her home language.

This study found that continuing to be monolingual at a tertiary level might worsen the challenges, especially if the student's home language is not English. The university's academic activities are assessed in English, and lack of proficiency in the language might lead to failure to comprehend the content of the work. Thus, monolingualism can make an individual seem inadequate. These findings have implications for language policy development and the implementation of such policies. Being monolingual in English benefits the university's academic activities but can affect interactions negatively beyond the lecture halls. Students are limited in networking with one another at a deeper level, as they cannot express themselves in their native language to everyone. Thus, the limitation can hinder students' opportunities with others, and the situation worsens for the students when they enter society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations on how multilingualism can be promoted, practised and striven towards. The development of indigenous languages into languages of learning and teaching would require mammoth resources, both material and human. If these languages are to be introduced into the classrooms as academic languages, the curricula must be produced or translated into these languages. Teachers should be trained to incorporate multilingualism in their classrooms. In addition, this strategy requires a coordinated effort from different stakeholders and not just from a few scholars.

A term that assists learners and educators in practising multilingualism is translanguaging. Translanguaging occurs when an individual uses their native language or variety to understand a concept in another language or variety. Teachers or peers might explain some concepts in a learner's native language for better understanding, called translanguaging, which promotes multilingualism. Translanguaging is beneficial in educational settings to assist in understanding and communicating effectively in the classroom. Translanguaging allows learners to initiate and control their learning by employing their diverse linguistic resources. Multilingualism is thus practised without disregarding an individual's native or first language.

In addition, the mindset of monolinguals towards multilingualism needs to change. Individuals exposed to multilingual education and languages do not abandon their culture and mother languages. Instead, multilingual individuals are more prone to preserve and develop their cultures and still be able to interact with society at large. The practice of multilingualism can reduce the practice of inequality and improve the understanding of different cultures. South African education aims to ensure that all learners can engage with the curriculum meaningfully. Therefore, teachers should allow learners to speak in their dialect. If this aim is achieved, learners will be able to express themselves better in their variety of speech and not be mocked by the school system. Therefore, the academic performance of learners might increase, leading to greater social justice for all.

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