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### Student Voice: Perspectives on Language and Critical Pedagogy in South African Higher Education

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#### Abstract

In the past two years, higher education institutions (HEI) have been inundated with students' demands for a decolonised education. Their voice led to the resuscitation of debates on a transformed curriculum. Amongst others, the language question is an issue at the centre of these debates. What students were questioning was the hegemony of English, the slow pace in which universities implement multilingual policies, and lack of clarity on the positioning of African languages as languages of learning and teaching. In this paper, we argue that if higher education aims to address marginalised and new knowledge through a decolonised curriculum, fundamental questions are worth being asked. In particular the questions we are asking and responding to are: "How does student voice become a force for social change?" "How can student voice enable HEIs to deal with the issue of language?" We suggest and support the view that the issue of language should be recognised as a social justice issue, that student voice can enlighten curriculum designers and society on the dangers of reproducing inequalities through the hegemony of English, and that graduate attributes, as an essential notion, should recognise multilingualism as a core skill that students should acquire.

**Keywords:** graduate attributes, higher education institution, language, multilingualism, social change, student voice

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## Introduction

Who is a student at universities today? What is the nature of his or her linguistic repertoires? In thinking about these questions, one needs to acknowledge that students who enter universities come from a schooling system that hegemonises the use of English (McKinney, 2017). Although in the literature, it is acknowledged that learning begins through a home language (Hurst, 2016), black students who study in former white schools experience an education system that suppresses the use of their home languages (Kerfoot & Simon-Vandenberg, 2015). This reality is further exacerbated by the explicitly expressed attitude of African parents, who prefer English and stigmatise their African languages, and thus feel strongly that better education can only be achieved through English medium (Msila, 2011). Skutnabb-Kangas (2009, p. 2) echoed this view when she argued that “parents ‘want’ English-medium education and assimilation for their children, hoping this leads to better jobs, it is claimed—and often this is true.” Arguably, African languages are considered as not having an equal status and market value as English. This perception of the unequal status of languages, which seems to be a national arrangement “endorses the reproduction of power and inequalities at the macro-level of social interaction” (Ralarala, 2017, p. 219). As a matter of legislation, our South African linguistic infrastructure and language in education are up to par. Mwamwenda (2013, p. 53) reflected on this fact: “South Africa’s constitution provides that children are entitled to education in one or more of the 11 official languages, wherever this is possible.”

English is the language of learning and teaching at most universities in South Africa (Ramani, Kekana, Modiba, & Joseph, 2007). It is public knowledge that the universities of Free State and Stellenbosch, quite recently, have adopted English as the language of learning and teaching. As such, a student whose African language is marginalised in primary education enters a university system that perpetuates the same process. Access to higher education has expanded along racial and gender lines since the institution of a constitutional democracy (Department of Education, 2016). Be mindful that African students are still victims of “educational policies and practices [which] favour students from backgrounds that are more privileged in social class, race, language or other differences” (Niето, 2010, p. xiv). This is evident in cases where the language of teaching and learning is not an African language. Some of these practices have conditioned the minds of students to believe that their success in a globalised and capitalist world depends solely on the mastery of English language. Also, when we discuss multiculturalism or the development of indigenous languages as mainstream academic and research languages in higher education, the same African students raise concerns about access to opportunities or employability after graduation. These contradictions remind us about the relationship of language, power, and authority—and how we constantly use hegemonic languages to negate African identity, history, and experiences. From this perspective, language then continues to be a vehicle towards promoting a culture of silence (Makalela, 2015; McLaren, 1999). Silencing the voices—in some cases—which confront and challenge students’ success at universities, in many ways, tend to have a direct bearing on students’ access to knowledge, academic performance, and meaning making, to mention a few.

Engaged learning occurs when students make meaning of what they are learning (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Meaning making entails making connections between what students already know and the new knowledge as well as new forms of thought. Through this process, we engage our students in learning that orients them towards active citizenship, and prepare them “to analyze and challenge forms of discrimination that they, their families, and others face” (Sleeter, 2015, p. 3). In that cognitive process, what language or languages do multilingual students use? What does it mean when those languages are not recognised and intellectualised in the university space? How do we move from focusing on the goal of education as equipping people to earn a living, to a goal of education that first recognises and values their way of being, including culture, background knowledge, and language (Bartolome, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009)? Since that is not the case, a decolonised curriculum should address issues of

social justice and critical pedagogies, which will enable students to engage in dialogues on change and transformation. Here, we consider Nancy Fraser's categories of social justice—namely, distributive, recognitional, and associational social justice—if we seek to address the existing linguistic and cultural imperialism in higher education (Fraser, 1997). This offers an opportunity to learn “from indigenous peoples who although colonized and historically decimated, are still here” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 195). As such,

*everything that we view, our very perception of reality is mediated through language. And if our command, our knowledge, our usage of a particular language is poor or weak, . . . it stands to reason that our ability to understand our environment and the world around us will be characterised by conceptual and terminological limitations. (Ralarala et al., 2017, pp. 182–183)*

Arguably, in educational spaces, real learning can be achieved through not only embracing language, particularly marginalised languages and other language varieties, as tools through which perceptions of reality are mediated but also through espousing and linking language to social justice (Corson, 1993) and critical pedagogy. At the university, knowledge can never be neutral or apolitical, as some scholars claim; on the contrary, it is always linked to an ideology, and the knowledge that we dispense to our students, shapes their lives and experiences (Freire, 1972; Nieto, 2010). The intersection between language and social justice challenges us to interrogate the “ontological and epistemological assumptions on which Western knowledge rests, and which massively distort comprehension of Indigenous knowledge” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 195).

In the light of students' protests and calls for transformation that transpired in the past three years, it appears that students can influence the course of events in higher education. The issues of language, such as positioning African languages as languages of teaching and learning in HEIs, have been ongoing since the demise of apartheid. However, nothing seems to have changed robustly. How does student voice then become a force for social change? If language can hinder access to knowledge, how does higher education position itself in dealing with this issue?

In this paper, we first discuss literature that positions HEIs as key in enabling student voice to emerge and analyse societal matters. This is followed by a critical examination of the notions of coloniality and the colonial wound, and how their seeds derail a shift from hegemonic languages to the recognition of multilingualism. Then we provide a critical review of critical pedagogy and link it to issues of language in schooling. Finally, we suggest and support the view that the issue of language should be recognised as a social justice issue, that student voice can enlighten curriculum designers and society on the dangers of reproducing inequalities through the hegemony of English, and that graduate attributes should recognise multilingualism as a core skill that students should acquire.

## Higher Education and Student Voice

Research on student voice (Gambrell, 2016; Smyth, 2006; Urban & Kujinga, 2017) is not new, but it has not been given much attention in higher education for the purposes of transforming the curriculum. While these researchers agree on the importance and the legitimacy of student voice in ensuring that change takes place, in challenging injustices and fostering social development the questions that have not been fully explored in literature are how universities respond to this voice, and how student voice can enable HEIs to respond to language questions.

Higher education has a role to play in a democratic society and in educating students for “democratic public life” (Walker, 2002, p. 44). This statement begs to question whether universities are able to produce holistic graduates who have not only acquired academic skills but are also able to engage in public life social justice issues. Giroux (2002, p. 8) argued: “Education is a crucial site where students gain a public voice and come to grips with their own power as individuals and social agents.” He further asserted that students need to critically engage with knowledge that addresses issues of power, culture, and histories. Vally (2007) added that it is the role of HEIs to create opportunities for students to question the knowledge presented to them, and to resist and reject ideologies that reproduce elitism. Vally’s observation was echoed by Walker (2002) when arguing that universities are succumbing to the demands and values of the market place—a view that questions the ethical and humanising purpose of a university.

In the literature, convincing evidence on higher education disputes the view that HEIs are only meant to prepare students to earn a living and challenges them to enable students to connect with real world problems (Giroux, 2002, 2011; Harward, 2016). When students fulfil the requirements of their respective academic programmes and eventually graduate, they join a society, which is riddled with sociopolitical ills, filled with rhythms of constant social change. And as university graduates, they are not only expected to be actively involved in the labour market but also to share their intellectual contribution as supposedly informed by critical pedagogy for the betterment and development of society (Giroux, 2011).

Modern universities are now driven by the expectations and ills of neoliberalism and capitalism (Vally, 2007). Increasingly, university curricula and pedagogical practices are harnessed to a “market-based view of the world that conceptualizes the good life largely as pursuit of wealth and material consumption within a highly competitive market-based system” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 194). Today, higher education is drifting further away from its moral mandate to train critical thinkers and socially conscious citizens who can question the rationality of Western epistemic traditions in African universities. Despite years of commitment to the transformation of higher education in postapartheid South Africa or broadly in postcolonial Africa, what we imagine today as African universities are in fact European universities in Africa that constantly dismiss and decentre the intellectual values of indigenous people (see Aina, 2010; Badat, 2009; Soudien, 2010).

Young (2000) argued that, as an enabling environment, societies also have a role to play in enabling a space where students can express their feelings and diverse perspectives, and where others can listen. She further argued that such dialogic engagements are urgent. Nevertheless, this does not assume consensus among the students and members of society.

Despite the shifting focus of modern universities, the questions we continue to ask are: “How do universities prepare students to think beyond the classroom and, possibly, contribute to the public good and critical dialogues that encompass, inter alia, issues of gender violence, racial discrimination, inequalities, and linguistic human rights?” “How do pedagogical practices enable student voice to emerge as a powerful force that can contribute towards a transformed curriculum where they could see themselves, their identities, and histories without being pressurised to conform to the demands of the market?” Whilst literature indicates that university academics are constantly avoiding controversial topics such as race, class, gender, and language in classroom discussions, creating the impression that “that all major conflicts [in postapartheid South Africa] have been resolved” (Nieto, 2010, p. 79), it would be useful to further investigate if university academics and administrative staff reflect and critically discuss the role of universities in the 21st century. In our view, it did not have to take student protests in 2015/2016 to remind universities of their political, social, and ethical role in society. Clearly, it turned out that the silencing the voice attitude had not gone unnoticed. Given the

power of student voice in influencing reforms and change, issues such as the linguistic human rights as well as the marginalisation of African languages in teaching and learning in HEIs, in particular, were raised by students.

There is critique that part of the reason HEIs do not seem to be urgently responding to reforms for social change is due to their strong ties with business and big companies who are instrumental in providing funding for these institutions (Giroux, 2002, 2011). The question then is: “How profitable is promoting African languages, in particular in teaching and learning, and how much funding do these outside coffers put into the development of these languages?” Although universities seem to be faced with a choice of balancing their role in society, their concerns for student success, and appeasing the funders, in our view it is not clear how in the universities, African languages take centre stage in the education and development of African societies. Prah (1998) echoed this view when arguing that:

*It is in language that people find their mental home, their definitional relationship to the external world. What this also means is that people can hardly be themselves in an idiom in which they have difficulty understanding or expressing themselves. They can barely be creative and innovative in a language they have to struggle with in order to command expression. (p. 2)*

In a democratic country such as South Africa, citizens have a right to the use of their own language. In Section 6 of the Constitution (1996), African languages have been given official status. The right of a language and the right to a language have been well defined in the constitutional provisions. Denying the right for students and learners to learn in their home language is unconstitutional and not democratic. Notably, the concept of democracy is understood by Mignolo (2007, p. 162) as “something we aim for yet still remains at a distance.” In the same vein, the Constitution is not self-executing and implementing, but merely a guiding principle that requires ethical citizenship and responsible and enabling leadership to devise proper mechanisms for its successful implementation.

Student movement and voice do not only form a fundamental part of this vision but remain critical and legitimate in taking these developmental initiatives beyond the current century. Giroux (2002, p. 27) pointed out that

*students need to learn how to take responsibility for their own ideas, take intellectual risks, develop a sense of respect for others different from themselves and learn how to think critically in order to function in a wider democratic culture.*

Such risks are worth taking because they carry potential and huge spinoffs regarding education and vision for the future. For students, this implies shifting perspectives and learning how to seize opportunities that will enable them to contribute towards social change. Students are aware that they want to see change as well as a transformed education system that will not privilege a certain section of the society. How do the curriculum and pedagogical practices enable such spaces of debate and change? While thinking through these questions, we wondered whether multilingualism should begin at the basic education level. In the next section, we examine the notions of coloniality and the colonial wound, and how their seeds derail a shift from hegemonic languages to the recognition of multilingualism.

## **Coloniality of Language and the Colonial Wound**

Recent calls in the field of language research argue for the reconceptualisation of languages as repertoires or resources (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; McKinney, 2017). In particular, debates on the

recognition of multilingual learners' languages as resources (Makalela, 2015; McKinney, 2017) are evident in conferences all over South Africa. Some of the initiatives in South African universities such as at University of KwaZulu-Natal where isiZulu is offered to all students, are commendable. Meanwhile, colonial discourses are reproduced as English continues to be the language of teaching and learning in schools and HEIs (Hurst, 2016). These discourses are evident in the knowledge, paradigms, texts, theories, methodologies, and practices that continue to be used in educational institutions. As a result, African knowledge, lived experiences, and histories are not adequately represented in the current curriculum. Hence, students were vocal in calling for a decolonised education. Mignolo (2005) referred to coloniality and the colonial wound as the mindset and practices that magnify the European world as the centre of valid and unquestionable knowledge:

*Those who are subjected to the standards of modernity are defined by the colonial wound which manifests itself physically and/or psychologically as a consequence of racism, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of those who are not European. . . . The six European languages (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and English) have been and continue to be a trademark of intellectual history, political and economic consequences. (p. 8)*

What Mignolo (2005) referred to is the journey of the South African education system, which was built on colonial systems followed by the apartheid system. In 1994, when democracy was instituted, it brought hope to the majority and unprivileged people in this country. However, even after 23 years of a liberated country, the education system is not yet free from the chains of oppression. In schools, the subtractive model of bilingualism, which assumes that the acquisition of the second language would be detrimental to an individual's first language (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010), is adopted in most schools, and perpetuates the dominance of English and Afrikaans—languages that were privileged in the past. In fact, this model—unlike the additive model which takes on an opposing view, as noted by Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010)—is tantamount to the violation of human rights and, as such, should be considered as a crime against humanity. The same trend, as we have observed, continues to be reproduced in higher education institutions in the South African context.

Mignolo (2007) traced the root of coloniality to when modernity was introduced to the colonised world. He argued that modernity is the logic of oppression and exploitation that manifests itself in dehumanising practices, science, knowledge, and art. Furthermore, he asserted that we are in a “Western epistemic trap” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 166). Hence, the world has to heal from the colonial wound, which is embedded, inter alia, in language. Prah (1995) underscored this view when he argued that:

*the object was to create an African who with understanding of European languages would serve the intentions of colonial power and administration. African education created an elite which distanced itself from the usage of native language. Over the years, the condition has become firmly entrenched. (p. 37)*

Indeed, the colonial wound is still deeply entrenched in the education system. In South African history, missionaries wrote down what they heard the indigenous people speaking, and then created the words and the grammar that became the mother tongue (Gilmour, 2007). Writing grammar was one of the strategies that colonisers used to reorganise the languages of the local people to divide and control their social interactions (Veronelli, 2015). Accordingly, “language is an expression of knowledge and grammar is an instrument to teach a language” (Veronelli, 2015, p. 114). Therefore, it follows to ask how coloniality conditions and controls a language—including, to dehumanise the colonised people. Although scholars argue that colonial languages can be appropriated and reinvented to disrupt oppression and domination, the language still has “the potential to disempower those of us who are

just learning to speak, who are just learning to claim language as a space where we make ourselves subjects” (hooks, 1994, p. 168). Does refraining students from learning through their African languages not reproduce the same colonial hierarchies that stifle societies’ expectations?

If students at HEIs are prepared to engage in debates towards social justice and freedom, the question to be asked is whether these societies are monolingual or multilingual in nature. From this perspective, monolingual curricula misguide students that there are no alternative ways of being and knowing in higher education by not exposing them to “the complexity of the world and the many perspectives involved” (Nieto, 2010, p. 79). Using a different lens in engaging with societies would require a multilingual and holistic student whose competencies are highly developed in their home language and other languages that are spoken in the country. We concur with Blommaert (2015) that language use should be in tandem with the goals of language in a particular context. How do monolingual speakers engage with speakers of other languages in a multilingual and diverse country such as South Africa? An acceptance of the status quo would mean accepting the “pervasiveness of the colonial matrix of power” (Hurst, 2016, p. 219). How do we then link the issues of language to critical pedagogy? The next section attempts to delve into the issue of language and the way it relates to critical pedagogy.

### **Linking Language to Critical Pedagogy**

Scholars who are in the forefront of social justice work operationalise critical pedagogy as a method of analysing the oppressive and emancipatory potential of all educational forms (Freire, 1972, 1985; Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 1999). Freire’s work on critical pedagogy offered “both a critique of the way schooling, in its current form, reinforces systems of oppression, as well as a theory of how education can become a means to help people collectively fight back against the inequalities they face” (Tarlau, 2014, p. 370). McLaren (1999, p. 441) argued that critical pedagogy “is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structure of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state.” Critics of critical pedagogy argue that they only focus on why schools reproduce the same economic, social, and racial hierarchies but fail to make connections between radical educational practices and concrete examples of social change.

Proponents of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 2011) assert that as a form of teaching it has a strong agenda for change, and is aimed at developing students who are active and engaged citizens. Critical pedagogy also teaches students to oppose suppressive and exploitative situations. Furthermore, this philosophy provokes students to reason beyond their familiar worldview and, thus, offers them a new way of thinking (Kincheloe, 2008). As such, “critical pedagogy aims to create a political space that allows learners to make up their own minds about what to think and how to act” (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016, p. 589). Linking language issues to critical pedagogy does not merely mean suggesting ways in which higher education recognises student matters that are at the heart of their concerns. This inextricable connection between language and critical pedagogy also means that language is not only a means of communication but a discourse through which perceptions of reality are mediated—and this is where the agency lies.

In a monolingual context, it appears legitimate to assume that multilingual learners are coping with their studies. Equally disturbing is research at the University of Cape Town, which reports that as black students immerse themselves at university, they accept being taught in English and maintain their home languages for cultural identity but not as academic language (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). Reference to these findings in relation to critical pedagogy suggests that black students have “internalized the discourse of the oppressor” (Allen & Rossatto, 2009, p. 165), which is the privileged status that is associated with English. To see transformation and change, students need to engage critically about the glaring forms of oppression in relation to language. Their voice would, therefore, encourage a

and support the view that the language issue should be recognised as one of social justice. Also, that student voice can enlighten curriculum designers and society on the dangers of reproducing inequalities through the hegemony of English, and that graduate attributes should recognise multilingualism as an essential prerequisite that students should embrace. Kamwangamalu (2015) spoke of the necessity for school-acquired knowledge of African languages to be one of the job requirements for African people. We extend the argument to say even non-mother tongue speakers of the language should be able to use African languages, even if on a conversational level (Mayaba, 2015, 2016). We further recommend that the questions asked in this paper throughout the discussion should serve as a framework for further discussions.

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