

Translanguaging In Counselling Sessions: Exploring Counsellor's Experiences in Institutions of Higher Learning

Mwanza, N¹, Nyimbili, F²

¹Counsellor at Copperbelt University

²Senior Lecturer at Chalimbana University

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0074>

Received: 04 November 2024; Accepted: 11 November 2024; Published: 06 March 2025

ABSTRACT

Zambia is a multilingual Nation with 73 ethnic languages in use and one of the languages English has been adopted as the official language used in official communication. The study explored translanguaging practices in counselling sessions of university students in Zambia. This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore counsellors' and clients' experiences with translanguaging in counselling. Six counsellors and 6 students who underwent counselling were interviewed at two public universities in Zambia. The study found Translanguaging can foster a welcoming environment, show acceptance and provide opportunities to learn and show concern for another person's well-being despite their language differences. Monolingual rigidity in educational institutions was found to hinder effective communication in counselling sessions, especially for clients in Zambia who use English as a second language. Restricting clients to English was found to prevent such students from sharing crucial information and emotions. As such, allowing translanguaging fosters better conversations between clients and counsellors. The study concludes that universities should support multilingual environments, especially in counselling sessions, enabling counsellors to appreciate students' linguistic diversity and facilitate effective communication through translanguaging. Additionally, the study highlighted both the challenges and benefits of implementing translanguaging in counselling practices. The study recommended that counsellors need to practice flexibility and recognise the role language plays in counselling conversations so that there is meaningful and genuine support towards students.

Keywords: Translanguaging in counselling, Communication in counselling, multilingual counselling, international clients

BACKGROUND

The ability to communicate is a crucial aspect of any relationship and is fundamental to the role of a counsellor (AIPC, 2006). Nyimbili (2021) emphasises the importance of language in enabling meaningful communication. Capstick and Atik (2021) suggest that learning a new language can be a liberating experience for young people who have faced persecution. They argue that learning a new language goes beyond just acquiring a skill and can symbolise liberation. Furthermore, they highlight the dynamic nature of moving between languages in counselling or learning.

Zambia is a multi-ethnic country with 73 ethnic groups, each with its own language (Nyimbili, 2021). Arising from this, the institutions of higher learning in Zambia draw their students from these ethnic groupings and languages across the nation. Nyimbili and Mwanza (2021) argued the need to use translanguaging due to the multilingual nature of the Zambian environment to enhance effective and dynamic interactions. Other scholars like Mungala and Mwanza (2024) argue differently in their findings that university students are seen to be proficient in English and translanguaging needs to be supported by some academicians and students. With such divergent views, it is yet to be known how translanguaging is done in counselling sessions in Zambia. This study explores counsellors' experiences with translanguaging practices in institutions of higher learning's

Considering the multitude of languages in Zambia, literature from Yasar and Debilities (2022) can help to argue that translanguaging, the simultaneous use and integration of languages, plays an important role in

communication. Additionally, Owen (1991) emphasises the importance of counsellors using carefully chosen words in their responses, as these words can significantly impact the cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects of counselling dialogues.

University counsellors who work with international students need the skills to effectively address these students' unique vulnerabilities due to their overlapping identities of race, nationality, and language, as highlighted by inter-sectionalist theory. This complexity is further compounded by systemic racism and discrimination, as noted by Zhai (2024).

Furthermore, other research, such as that by Jaelani and Ziadeh (2024), highlights the complexities associated with language use in counselling. The findings indicated that selecting a language like Arabic reflects spiritual identity and enables individuals to address their concerns in alignment with their beliefs, values, and emotions within their religious context. This understanding implies that counsellors must be aware that language use fosters environments that allow clients to operate within a secure space that promotes authenticity and feelings of being understood and supported.

Studies like Capstick and Atik (2021) have demonstrated the benefits of trans language. The study notes that translanguaging empowers learners and educators by focusing on teaching, enhancing experiences, and developing identity. The aspects mentioned by Capstick and Atik not only work in the classroom setting but can be beneficial for counsellors to apply in the session to enrich the counselling experience.

Popoola et al. (2012) emphasise that effective counselling relies on trust, intimacy, and relational communication for disclosure. Effective communication can lead to the development of trust and intimacy, which in turn promotes disclosure. Language plays a significant role in this communication. Ndhlovu and Mwanza (2024) stress the importance of counsellors using methods that make clients feel welcomed and encourage them to freely express themselves for counselling to be effective. Such literature highlights the need to study how translanguaging is used in counselling sessions in a multilingual environment to foster an environment that encourages clients to freely express themselves.

Degano and Kirsch (2020) studied students' perspectives of translanguaging, utilising recordings from discussions and stimulated recall interviews. The study revealed that all four students defaulted to translanguaging as their primary mode of communication, considering it a common practice. Newcomers reported using translanguaging to communicate more efficiently, particularly those who still needed to become proficient in the language. Conversely, students with more experience in the education system viewed translanguaging as an inferior practice and mentioned using their home language as a scaffold with other students, but not with their teachers.

Statement of the Problem

This study by Degano and Kirsch (2020) offers valuable insights into students' perceptions of translanguaging. The findings indicate that students often engage in translanguaging naturally; some use it to integrate into groups, while others view it as a less favourable practice. These insights could inform counselling practices within educational institutions.

Building on the significant benefits of translanguaging highlighted by Capstick and Atik (2021), such as empowering individuals, enhancing experiences, and developing identity, it became crucial to explore how counsellors incorporate this approach in their sessions. Consequently, this study sheds light on the experiences of counsellors who utilize translanguaging at two public learning institutions.

Objective

The study aimed to explore counsellors' experiences with translanguaging in institutions of higher learning.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a phenomenological research design so that the feelings and expressions of the counsellors

and clients could be understood through the way they interacted using language. Counsellors were purposively sampled for the study because they facilitated the communication and partly determined the language to use in the conversation. Six students who underwent counselling volunteered to be part of the study and they were interviewed separately. The discussions were recorded with permission from the participants who signed a consent form. Data was thematically analysed as emerging themes were used to present the findings of the study. Participant anonymity was guaranteed as they were not mentioned in the study but codes were used to represent their views. A consent form was filled out before the study was conducted. The risks and benefits were further discussed with the participants.

Findings and Discussions

The study explored translanguaging in counselling sessions based on students' and counsellors' experiences at two higher-learning public institutions. The results are presented under the following themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the findings. The themes are diversity and multilingual backgrounds, first language effects, multinationals, the social linguistics effects on communication, and monolingual rigidity in learning institutions.

Diversity and multilingual backgrounds

The study showed that the language backgrounds of the clients and counsellors affected how they communicated. The various ethnic groupings had some form of cultural influences that were relatable in the manner they communicated and expressed themselves. From this, two sub-themes emerged from the findings; the client language orientation and the counsellor language orientation.

It was found that the clients who attended counselling services came from different linguistic backgrounds which influenced their communication, thought presentation, meanings, and communication in a conversation. Therefore, the counsellor needs to be flexible in the way he or she interacts with the client linguistically.

Participant #10 counsellor said;

“Universities receive students from various ethnic and settlement groupings that have their first language different from others, including their gestures and some cultural orientations. Expecting all of them to be able to express themselves fully in one language, especially in a counselling session may be an overlook of meaningful dialogue which is a key to successful counselling”

Participant 2 student noted that:

I have been finding it easier to interact with a counsellor who can allow me to express myself freely in my language in one way or the other. It is not easy to express myself fully in a language I do not know so much. I will miss some of the information and end up not receiving the help I need.

These findings are supported by Mungala and Mwanza (2024) who assumed that translanguaging was taking place purposely for the sake of making some concepts well understood by the learners. In this case, the provision of linguistic rights to clients provided them to become free and make use of the opportunity to express themselves to the fullest. Therefore, counsellors need to break the linguistic barriers that exist between them and the clients they interact with to create a conducive interactive atmosphere which will enable the client to be helped using the language he or she can understand better. Therefore, allowing the use of different languages in a counselling session should be encouraged in university counselling rooms as safe spaces.

First Language Proficiency

The study found that in most cases, the first language of the client had a way of coming out in the communication especially when the clients got so emotional and were venting out their frustration or challenges. The expressions which the clients made were all in their first language, emotional, gestures and voice changes. Understanding this cultural communication was very important to ensure that they communicated with each other effectively during the interaction. Participant counsellor #3

“A lot of the clients have a first language they learnt and in it, they can easily express themselves with fewer challenges. A counsellor may need to allow their client to switch and use words that are fully understood by the client to supplement their inadequacy in official language if communication between the two is to be of significance.”

Participant counsellor #5 added;

“I have come across clients who get so emotional and switch languages in that state. It just gets easy for them when emotionally charged to speak their first language.”

Participant 3 added that:

“I have liked the counsellors who have ensured that they have understood the feelings I express in my native language, rather than those who would want me to pretend to know the English language. I need to fully express how I feel in my language for me to make sense”

Therefore, counsellors who understand the language the client is expressing their emotions in become better placed to help such a client. It is then relevant to state that counsellors need to be open to other language use, not to see it as a barrier to communication, and accommodate students' language for them to help the students better during the counselling sessions.

The findings of the study are in line with Nyimbili (2021) argued that translanguaging practices increased learner performance while monolingual practices were responsible for poor performance. The use of local languages initiated by either the counsellor or the clients may also lead to improved relations and both can open up and share relevant experiences in the problem they are handling. In this case, the counsellor who handles multilingual students should ensure that they become flexible when using language and allow the students to use languages they are familiar with if they are to share the relevant experiences as they are experienced by the client. This promotion would enable clients to come back for more help as they will be free to share their experiences in the counselling sessions.

Multi-Nationals

Clients from countries where English is not the only official language were said to present challenges in communication. Counsellor experiences stated that they experienced some form of challenges, as they had to exercise a lot of patience to appreciate the conversation, which is pivotal to the counselling experience. Participant Counsellor #9 noted that;

“Some clients, especially from other neighbouring countries, especially those that speak French usually have been finding it hard to speak and share their issues in English. A counsellor usually has to be very patient to establish what they are trying to say and together draw out meanings from the words”

Participant Counsellor 4 adds that;

“Some clients usually flow in their original language especially those times when they are agitated by something and you would notice them struggling to maintain the official language demanded of them.”

The findings of the study on translanguaging in counselling showed that most clients would emote in their first language, especially in a state of agitation. Degano and Kirsc (2020) demonstrate that individuals would by default speak their first language in interactions. This would mean that counsellors need to exercise flexibility in language use as they encourage their clients to vent and openly discuss their concerns. Similarly, Zhai (2024) argues the need for counsellors to be sensitive to race, ethnicity and other overlapping identity issues when interacting with multinationals. Findings of this nature and literature entail the need to have counsellors who are sensitive and trained in culturally sensitive counselling practices to meaningfully support multinational students.

Sociolinguistics Environments

The findings showed that the counsellors noted the client's usage of words that were only commonly used within

the peer groups finding their way into the counselling sessions. Some of these words were common English words but had implied meanings that meant counsellors needed to enquire more about the actual meanings of the words.

Participant counsellor 2 said;

“The common terms and kind of jargon that is in use, especially among young people may act as a communication barrier in the counselling room as some of the terms are so contexture among young people and have a different meaning in their usage. Words like exile, import, and monk have a contexture meaning among university students”

Participant counsellor 9 added that;

“There are times when am conducting group activities, it becomes a bit challenging to follow through the words that young people make and use within the sentences. You would just notice in their speech a word or phrase that seems to shift the direction or introduces a new dynamic in the discussion that only they may understand.”

Participant counsellor 5 agreed that;

“The terms that young people use in their speech are an interesting asset to dialogue, when you freely interact and allow them to express themselves freely in the safe space of a counselling session, not only do you learn more as a counsellor but also it enriches your understanding on how to relate and communicate with them”

Participant Student 12

“it is easier to speak in any language when we are among ourselves as students. That is what makes our communication so interesting. You flow with the vibe and it's fulfilling”

These findings are supported by Mwiinga and Mwanza (2024) who emphasized that most teachers are keenly aware of their students' multilingual backgrounds and actively use this knowledge to support diverse learners. This is a crucial approach that counsellors can adopt as well. By recognizing and incorporating the languages of their students, counsellors can create a space where learners feel comfortable expressing their needs and situations. Interestingly, even students from other countries often pick up some Zambian languages, which can serve as a valuable tool for communication with their counsellors. When genuine understanding and support are provided, it can make a significant difference in the students' experiences.

Monolingual Rigidity in Institutions of Learning

The counsellors indicated that it was expected that clients in institutions of higher learning were expected to communicate in the official language English. This is the standard of communication in Zambian institutions of learning but the counselling sessions showed some clients that were not able to fully express themselves in the standard language. This was proving to be a barrier, as those who had challenges to fully express themselves orally would avoid such communication situations including counselling. Participant Student #7 noted the following:

“Zambia institutions of learning have a rigid monolingual system where all the interactions are expected to be done in English as it is marked as the official language hence even in counselling sessions, interactions are expected to be done in English. Some people that may not be good with this language would shun situations that put them in a place where they are required to use this language, especially with an officer like a counsellor”

Participant counsellor 2

“Counselling can be done in any language familiar to the individuals interacting, but for our settings in

university, there is this need to work within the formal framework of using the official language which tends to dictate how we communicate and relate especially since everyone is expected to communicate effectively in English”

Participant counsellor 10

“Normally I am so comfortable with the use of English in my sessions, but when in a meeting with a client who has challenges communicating in English, I tend to lean back and let them speak in the language they are free especially where I can understand and communicate back”

Participant Student 12

“it doesn't feel official when you speak vernacular languages in an official capacity” Participant Student # 11

“We used to get reprimanded in primary and secondary school when you use other languages as a result. It is just hard to speak in another language when talking to an officer of the institution”

Benefits of Translanguaging in Counselling

Some findings indicated that using familiar languages helped create a sense of acceptance and welcome when their local language is accepted by the counsellor in the sessions in higher education. This was confirmed by Participant counsellor #3

“Some clients have stated that they felt welcomed and accepted when they were allowed to freely express themselves including using words from other languages in the dialogue”

Participant counsellor #7 emphasized that incorporating different languages and terminology enriches the dialogue and deepens their genuine concern for the client’s well-being. This approach opens up new avenues for understanding and connection, making the support offered even more meaningful.

“Listening to some words in a language that you are not familiar with provides an opportunity to learn something new, you can use that to demonstrate a genuine interest in the client's world, translanguaging in counselling has its benefits that we can draw upon”

The benefits of translanguaging as seen from the findings showed that clients felt accepted and welcome, that it provided an opportunity to learn something new, and helped to demonstrate a genuine interest in the clients. Language was seen to provide such benefits that could be likened to Jaelani and Ziadah's (2024) study that demonstrated that choice of language creates a context where the client can process their issues within the beliefs, and interpretations that come with it. Translanguaging can foster a welcoming environment, show acceptance and provide opportunities to learn and show concern for another person's well-being despite their language differences. It can be realised that translanguaging in the counselling sessions will make participants open up and bring out their problems correctly as they process their unmet needs. This makes them share the correct and needed emotional experiences which the counsellors have to know and deal with to help their clients effectively.

Challenges with Translanguaging in Counselling

Some findings highlighted that language switching can pose a significant challenge, especially when a counsellor isn't fully familiar with the client’s terminology. This lack of understanding can create a barrier, making communication more difficult and impacting the overall effectiveness of the session. Participant counsellor #4 said;

“Sometimes it gets so difficult to follow through the dialogue when clients keep switching to a language you may not be so conversant with more so the issue of Zambia having close to 73 languages”

Participant counsellor #9 equally stated that

“I would advocate for the use of a common language that we can all have a shared understanding to me second guessing what was said”

Participant counsellor # 2

“It would affect my communication if I cannot fully understand the language being used. Moreover, certain words in English would not have a direct translation in some local languages”

Participant Student # 6

“it would require counsellors to learn a lot of languages to flow with this idea of clients using languages they are familiar with. In some cases, the counsellor may not be familiar with the language which the client is using causing challenges in communication”

The study reveals some intriguing challenges surrounding translanguaging. One key issue is that the use of multiple languages can create communication barriers and communication is pivotal to counselling (Popoola et al., 2012), especially for those who aren't familiar with the languages being spoken. This highlights the importance for counsellors to learn the local languages relevant to their settings, rather than relying solely on the official language. Additionally, switching between languages can lead to misunderstandings, complicating interactions even further if not well handled.

CONCLUSION

The study delved into the nuanced concept of translanguaging within the context of counselling at two higher education institutions. The study concludes that universities were diverse, and students had multilingual backgrounds which influenced their communication, thought presentation, meanings, and communication in a conversation. Translanguaging was a relevant tool to students, findings showed that when clients used their first language it helped them to find a way of expressing themselves in the conversations especially when the clients got so emotional and were venting out their frustration or challenges. This meant that counsellors had to exercise a lot of patience to appreciate the conversations, which is pivotal to the counselling experience. Translanguaging should not only be seen to be a barrier to some extent but a resource that counsellors can use to show acceptance, and genuine concern and enrich the dialogue. Counsellors need to create a conducive sociolinguistic environment so that clients can feel safe to talk and open up in any language they can express themselves correctly. The monolingual rigidity in Institutions of Learning was seen to be a hindrance to effective conversations in counselling sessions since many clients use English as a second language in Zambia. Therefore, restricting clients to use English instead of allowing translanguaging to flourish makes clients withhold important information and emotions which can be crucial to helping multilingual clients in universities. Therefore, both the client and the counsellor can have fruitful conversations when monolingual traits are not followed in a session. The study then concluded that multilingual environments like universities should enable counsellors to appreciate the students' linguistic collection and allow them to trans language during counselling sessions so that there is effective communication and help. This will result in solving problems which peers face in real time as they will be able to use the correct expressions and emotions to communicate their fears and feelings to which counsellors will also help using the correct language which both can fully understand.

This can be termed “effective communication in counselling’ in multilingual settings since language plays a key role when helping clients

REFERENCES

1. AIPC (2006). Communication and Counselling. <https://www.aipc.net.au/articles/communication-and-counselling/>
2. Capstick, T., and Atik, M. (2021). Translanguaging spaces as safe space for psycho-social support in refugee settings in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(2), 459–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1899192>
3. Jaelani, J and Ziadeh, Z., (2024) Language Use and Linguistic Performance in Peer Counselling

- within a Religious Tertiary Education Context. In book: Psycholinguistics - New Advances and Real-World Applications. DOI: [10.5772/intechopen.1003715](https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1003715)
4. Mungala, R. and Mwanza, D. S. (2024) Translanguaging Practices Lecturers Use When Teaching Literacy and Language in Multilingual Classrooms at A Selected University in Zambia. *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social*, 7(3); 781- 795
 5. Mwiinga, C. & Mwanza, D. S. (2024). Teachers' Use of MTB-MLE Strategies in Multilingual Lower Primary School Grades of Chongwe Rural District. *International Journal of Social Science, Management and Economics Research*, 2(3), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.61421/IJSSMER.2024.2303>
 6. Ndhlovu, D., and Mwanza, N. (2024). Use of the Empty Chair Gestalt Counselling Technique in Helping University Students with Peer Relationship Challenges: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*. (IJRSI) ISSN No. 2321- 2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI | Volume XI Issue VII July 2024. www.rsisinternational.org.
 7. Nyimbili, F. (2021). Impact of Translanguaging as Pedagogical Practice on Literacy Levels Among Grade One Literacy Learners in Lundazi District, Zambia. (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, The University of Zambia, Lusaka
 8. Nyimbili, F. and Mwanza, D. S. (2021). Quantitative and Qualitative Benefits of Translanguaging Pedagogic Practice Among First Graders in Multilingual Classrooms of Lundazi District in Zambia. *Multilingual Margins*, 7(3): 69-83 [accessed Sep 08 2024].
 9. Owen, I. R. (1991). Using the sixth sense: The place and relevance of language in counselling. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 19(3), 307–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069889108260394>
 10. Popoola, B., Adebowale, O., Akintomide, A., and Olatomide, O. O. (2012). Intimacy and Relational Communication in Online Counselling. December 2011. DOI: [10.4018/978-1-61350-204-4.ch005](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-61350-204-4.ch005)
 11. Tembo, M. G. and Nyimbili, F. (2021). The Practicality of using Indigenous Language (Nsenga) as Medium of Instructing at Grade 1-4 in Selected Primary Schools of Petauke District. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*. 9(10): 1-10
 12. Zhai, Y. and Precede, D. J. (2024) Promoting multicultural and social justice counselling competency of international counselling students. Y John Wiley & Sons Ltd. DOI: 10.1002/capr.12803