

# Language Usage in Multilingual University Classrooms: Toward an Inclusive Translanguaging Framework for Students and Lecturers in South African Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Multilingualism is a defining feature of South African higher education, yet university classrooms frequently remain organised around English as the principal language of teaching, learning, and assessment. This conceptual article examines how university students and lecturers use language in multilingual classrooms and proposes an inclusive framework for transforming linguistic diversity into a pedagogical resource. The article is based on an integrative review of scholarship on multilingual higher education, translanguaging, linguistic capital, epistemic access, and language-policy implementation, with particular attention to South African research and policy. The synthesis identifies five interrelated patterns. First, English offers mobility and access to global academic discourse, but simultaneously functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. Second, students use code-switching, peer explanation, translation, multilingual note-making, and digital communication to negotiate meaning. Third, lecturers employ multilingual practices unevenly, often informally and without adequate institutional support. Fourth, strategic translanguaging can strengthen conceptual understanding, participation, identity affirmation, and epistemic access. Fifth, implementation is constrained by multilingual class composition, limited terminology, assessment conventions, lecturer proficiency, workload, and monolingual institutional cultures. In response, the article develops the Inclusive Multilingual University Classroom Framework, comprising four connected dimensions: recognition of linguistic repertoires, purposeful multilingual pedagogy, equitable multilingual assessment support, and institutional enablement. The framework positions English and African languages as complementary rather than competing resources and assigns shared responsibilities to students, lecturers, departments, and university leadership. The article concludes that multilingual inclusion requires more than policy recognition or spontaneous code-switching. It requires planned pedagogical design, lecturer development, terminology resources, technology-supported access, and assessment practices that preserve disciplinary standards while widening opportunities to learn.

**Keywords:** higher education, language usage, multilingual classroom, South Africa, translanguaging

## INTRODUCTION

Universities are not linguistically neutral spaces because language does more than transmit information between lecturers and students. It shapes how disciplinary knowledge is selected, organised, explained, and evaluated. Language also influences who is recognised as knowledgeable, who feels confident enough to participate, and whose contribution is regarded as academically legitimate. Students who can communicate fluently in the dominant academic language may participate more visibly, while those who are still developing competence in that language may remain silent despite possessing relevant conceptual knowledge. Language practices, therefore, intersect with institutional power, identity, belonging, and epistemic access. South African universities remain affected by linguistic hierarchies that privilege English while positioning many indigenous African languages at the margins of formal knowledge production (Munyaradzi, 2024; Rakgogo, 2024).

The relationship between language and knowledge becomes particularly important in multilingual classrooms. Students and lecturers enter these classrooms with linguistic repertoires developed through their homes, schools, communities, religious institutions, workplaces, and digital communication environments. These repertoires may include several named languages, regional varieties, different forms of English, specialised disciplinary terminology, gestures, images, and culturally situated ways of explaining knowledge. From a multilingual perspective, these resources are not necessarily stored or used as separate systems. Speakers may draw flexibly on different linguistic and semiotic resources according to the audience, academic task, and communication purpose. Contemporary scholarship, therefore, understands multilingualism as a dynamic social practice rather than the possession of equal proficiency in several autonomous languages (Makalela & Da Silva, 2023; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2024; Prinsloo, 2023).

Classroom language usage consequently involves more than selecting the official language of teaching and learning. It includes the languages used to introduce a concept, ask questions, explain unfamiliar terminology, organise group work, take notes, consult digital resources, and produce assessed work. It also includes less visible processes, such as mentally translating an English explanation into a home language or using familiar cultural examples to interpret an abstract idea. These practices influence whether students merely encounter information or gain meaningful access to disciplinary knowledge. When universities insist on monolingual classroom practices, they may disregard the actual meaning-making strategies used by multilingual students and reproduce the assumption that academically valuable knowledge must be constructed and expressed exclusively in English (Madiba, 2024; McKinney & Tyler, 2024).

South African higher education provides an especially important setting for examining these relationships. The constitutional recognition of South African Sign Language in 2023 increased the number of official languages to twelve and reaffirmed the country's commitment to linguistic inclusion. The Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions similarly requires universities to promote multilingualism and develop indigenous African languages for teaching, learning, scholarship, and institutional communication. However, recent evaluations indicate that the movement from policy to implementation remains slow and uneven. Although universities have revised their language policies and established terminology development projects, English continues to dominate classroom instruction, assessment, research publications, and administration (Munyai, 2024; Rakgogo, 2024).

The continued dominance of English reflects its complex position in South African higher education. English facilitates communication among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and provides access to international research, professional networks, and employment opportunities. For these reasons, students may regard English proficiency as an important form of academic and economic capital. However, English can also serve as a gatekeeping mechanism when students must learn unfamiliar disciplinary content in a language in which they have limited academic proficiency. Research indicates that English-medium policies may reduce some multilingual students' comprehension, confidence, and classroom participation, even when they acknowledge the wider value of English (Munyaradzi, 2025; Sibanda & Joubert, 2024). The central challenge is therefore not simply whether English should be retained or rejected, but how it can be used without marginalising students' existing linguistic resources.

This challenge is closely connected to questions of epistemic justice and transformation. The historical marginalisation of indigenous African languages has contributed to the perception that these languages are appropriate for informal communication but inadequate for scientific, theoretical, or professional knowledge. Such assumptions limit their development as academic languages and reinforce inherited distinctions between languages associated with authority and languages associated with home and community life. Recent scholarship argues that South African universities remain embedded in linguistic hierarchies that determine which forms of knowledge receive recognition and which speakers enjoy institutional legitimacy (Munyaradzi, 2024). Developing indigenous languages is therefore not merely a matter of cultural preservation; it is connected to widening access to knowledge, transforming curricula, and enabling students to relate academic concepts to their social and intellectual contexts (Munyai, 2024; Rakgogo, 2024).

The multilingual university classroom is also shaped by lecturers' pedagogical decisions. Lecturers may restate difficult concepts in another language, translate specialised terminology, use multilingual examples, invite peer explanations or, permit students to discuss a problem in familiar languages before presenting their conclusions in English. Students may similarly translate internally, annotate English notes in their home languages, compare terminology, consult multilingual peers, and use digital translation tools. These practices are commonly described as translanguaging because they involve drawing on a speaker's complete linguistic repertoire to construct meaning. Translanguaging can strengthen conceptual understanding, encourage participation, and validate students' identities when it is linked deliberately to learning outcomes (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

Recent South African evidence nevertheless indicates that multilingual practices are not automatically inclusive. If a lecturer alternates between English and one locally dominant African language, students who do not understand that language may be excluded. In linguistically diverse classes, lecturers may also lack proficiency in all the languages represented. Yafele (2024) found that lecturers' ability to implement multilingual literacy pedagogies may be constrained by inadequate preparation, misconceptions about multilingualism, and institutional cultures that continue to favour monolingual teaching. Multilingual pedagogy, therefore, requires more than spontaneous code-switching. It requires strategies that make multilingual contributions accessible to the entire class, such as translated keywords, collaborative explanation, multilingual glossaries, captions, and shared summaries.

Digital technologies have expanded the possibilities for multilingual teaching and learning. Students can use electronic dictionaries, automated translation, multilingual videos, subtitles, speech-to-text applications, and instant-messaging platforms to support their understanding. Lecturers can provide captioned lectures, multilingual terminology resources, and alternative explanations of important concepts. However, digital tools also introduce concerns about translation accuracy, unequal access, data costs, and the representation of indigenous African languages. Research on subtitled and dubbed educational content shows that audiovisual resources can create productive spaces for students to use their linguistic repertoires, but fluid multilingual practices must still be connected to the development of formal academic registers required for academic and professional participation (Kruger-Roux et al., 2025).

Assessment represents a particularly important difficulty. Lecturers may permit multilingual discussion during teaching while requiring all assignments, tests, and examinations to be completed in English. This separation creates a situation in which multilingualism supports learning informally but does not receive equivalent recognition when students demonstrate achievement. Although common assessment languages may assist with moderation and comparability, they can also make it difficult to distinguish limited English proficiency from inadequate subject knowledge. An inclusive approach should not reduce disciplinary standards; rather, it should clarify when language competence is itself an assessed outcome and when language functions as the medium through which disciplinary understanding is demonstrated. Multilingual planning, glossaries, scaffolded academic writing, and transparent assessment criteria can create more equitable routes towards the required academic product (Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025; Yafele, 2024).

Despite increasing scholarship on multilingualism and translanguaging, an important gap remains. Many studies examine language policy, student experiences, academic literacy, or individual multilingual strategies separately. Less attention has been given to how student language practices, lecturer pedagogy, assessment arrangements, and institutional support interact within the same multilingual classroom system. Recent research has consequently called for stronger lecturer development and clearer institutional responsibility for moving multilingualism from policy aspiration to sustainable classroom practice (Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025; Yafele, 2024). Addressing this gap requires an integrated framework that recognises multilingual students as active meaning-makers while avoiding the transfer of institutional responsibility entirely onto students.

Against this background, the purpose of this conceptual article is to analyse language usage by students and lecturers in multilingual university classrooms and to propose a practical framework for inclusive multilingual pedagogy. The article addresses three questions: How do students and lecturers use their linguistic repertoires in multilingual university classrooms? What educational opportunities and constraints arise from these practices?

Which institutional and pedagogical principles can guide inclusive implementation? The article contributes to current scholarship by integrating student agency, lecturer practice, assessment, and institutional responsibility within a single framework suited to the South African higher-education context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Multilingualism, English and Linguistic Inequality

Multilingualism should not be understood merely as the presence of two or more separate languages within a society, institution or classroom. Contemporary scholarship conceptualises multilingualism as a dynamic social and communicative practice in which speakers draw flexibly on linguistic, cultural, visual, gestural and digital resources to construct meaning. Multilingual individuals do not necessarily use their languages as completely independent systems. Instead, they mobilise different elements of their linguistic repertoires according to their communicative purpose, audience, academic task and social setting. This perspective moves beyond counting the languages a person speaks and focuses on how linguistic resources are used to support learning, identity formation and participation (Makalela & Da Silva, 2023; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2024; Prinsloo, 2023).

This understanding is particularly relevant to South African universities because most students enter higher education with extensive multilingual repertoires. Their linguistic resources may include home languages, languages acquired through schooling, regional varieties, academic English and language practices developed through social media and other digital environments. Students may read an academic text in English, discuss its meaning in Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, isiZulu or another familiar language, record bilingual notes and eventually present their conclusions in English. These movements demonstrate that multilingualism forms part of students' ordinary meaning-making processes, even when the university formally recognises only English as the principal language of teaching and assessment (McKinney & Tyler, 2024; Yafele, 2024).

However, universities do not assign equal value to all linguistic resources. Languages are positioned within institutional hierarchies shaped by colonial history, political power, economic opportunity and participation in the global knowledge economy. English normally occupies the most influential position because it is associated with university admission, formal instruction, academic publishing, professional credibility and international mobility. Indigenous African languages, although constitutionally recognised, are frequently confined to informal communication, language-related programmes or limited terminology-development projects. This hierarchical arrangement can communicate that knowledge expressed in English is more credible than knowledge developed and communicated through African languages (Munyaradzi, 2024; Rakgogo, 2024).

Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital provides a useful lens for understanding these inequalities. Linguistic capital refers to the social and institutional value attached to particular language practices. Students who possess the institutionally valued variety of academic English enter university with an advantage because their prior linguistic experience corresponds with the expectations of lecturers, textbooks, assessments and scholarly writing. Their confidence and fluency may provide them with greater classroom visibility and easier access to academic networks. In contrast, students who use English as an additional language must frequently develop disciplinary knowledge and the specialised language through which that knowledge is communicated at the same time (Munyaradzi, 2025; Sibanda & Joubert, 2024).

This simultaneous demand creates an additional cognitive and academic burden. A student may understand a concept in a home language yet struggle to explain it using conventional English terminology. The lecturer may consequently interpret limited English expression as limited disciplinary knowledge. Academic assessment can therefore measure more than the intended subject knowledge; it may also measure students' previous access to particular varieties of English. Unless assessment criteria clearly distinguish linguistic proficiency from conceptual achievement, language may become an unintended barrier to the fair demonstration of learning (Munyai, 2024; Yafele, 2024).

Linguistic inequality also affects classroom participation. Students who are concerned about their pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary may avoid contributing to discussions, asking questions or challenging a lecturer's interpretation. Their silence may subsequently be misread as lack of preparation, confidence or understanding.

By contrast, students who are more proficient in academic English receive repeated opportunities to express their ideas, obtain feedback and strengthen their academic identities. Language therefore influences not only formal academic performance but also the distribution of voice, visibility and authority within the classroom (Sibanda & Joubert, 2024; Yafele, 2024).

English nevertheless cannot be represented exclusively as a mechanism of exclusion. Students may actively choose English because it enables communication across linguistic groups and connects them to national and international academic communities. It provides access to a substantial body of scholarly literature, global digital resources, professional networks and employment opportunities. In classrooms containing students from several language communities, English may also function as a shared language where no indigenous language is understood by everyone. Its use can therefore be associated with both practical communication and aspirations for academic and socioeconomic mobility (Munyaradzi, 2025; Sibanda & Joubert, 2024).

This produces a significant linguistic tension. English can function as a bridge that promotes communication and access to global knowledge, while simultaneously operating as a gatekeeper that limits participation for students with insufficient academic proficiency. Indigenous African languages can provide conceptual access, cultural affirmation and a sense of belonging, but selecting one regionally dominant African language may exclude speakers of other languages. The language problem in higher education can therefore not be resolved simply by replacing English with one indigenous language. Institutions must recognise the complex linguistic composition of their student populations and design flexible arrangements accordingly (Mbiri-Hungwe, 2024; Munyai, 2024).

An inclusive multilingual approach must avoid presenting English and indigenous African languages as opposing choices. The central question is not which language should defeat or replace the other, but how linguistic resources can be distributed to promote both disciplinary understanding and academic mobility. Students should be supported to develop proficiency in academic English without having to suppress the languages through which they already understand their social worlds. A student may discuss a concept through a home language, consult multilingual terminology and subsequently learn to communicate that concept in the recognised English register. This process expands access to English instead of using existing English proficiency as a precondition for learning (Madiba, 2024; McKinney & Tyler, 2024).

The intellectualisation of indigenous African languages is central to this process. Intellectualisation involves developing languages for specialised academic, scientific, technological and professional purposes. This requires terminology, dictionaries, textbooks, digital resources, scholarly publications and trained academics capable of teaching and researching through these languages. Word-for-word translation is insufficient because academic terminology must be developed through sustained disciplinary discussion and concept formation. Indigenous languages should not merely reproduce English knowledge; they should also provide resources for expressing perspectives grounded in African histories, cultures and knowledge systems (Munyai, 2024; Rakgogo, 2024).

Recent literature indicates that the policy recognition of multilingualism has not yet produced equivalent transformation in classroom practices. Some universities have adopted multilingual policies, established language units and developed terminology lists, but English continues to dominate lectures, textbooks, assessment, research publication and administration. This gap between policy and practice suggests that multilingualism is often treated as an institutional aspiration rather than an operational teaching responsibility. Meaningful transformation requires faculty-level language plans, lecturer development, multilingual learning materials, technological support and mechanisms for monitoring implementation (Munyaradzi, 2024; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

Ultimately, linguistic inequality demonstrates that formal admission to university does not necessarily guarantee equitable epistemic access. Students may occupy the same classroom and receive the same learning materials while possessing unequal access to the language through which disciplinary knowledge is taught and assessed. Addressing this inequality requires more than encouraging students to improve their English independently. Universities must examine how curriculum design, teaching practices, assessment conventions and institutional

cultures privilege particular linguistic groups. Multilingual transformation must therefore be treated as an educational, social-justice and institutional responsibility (Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025; Yafele, 2024).

### Translanguaging as Theory and Pedagogy

Translanguaging offers a theoretical and pedagogical response to the limitations of monolingual university practices. It refers to how multilingual speakers draw on their complete linguistic repertoires to communicate, think and construct knowledge. The concept challenges the assumption that named languages exist in speakers' minds as entirely separate systems. From a translanguaging perspective, multilingual students strategically combine linguistic and semiotic resources to meet the demands of particular tasks. They may read in English, discuss concepts in another language, use visual representations and then prepare a formal English response (Makalela & Da Silva, 2023; Prinsloo, 2023).

As a theoretical orientation, translanguaging rejects deficit interpretations of multilingual students' language practices. Moving between languages should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that students are confused or insufficiently proficient in English. Such movement may represent a sophisticated strategy for connecting new knowledge with existing concepts, identifying similarities between terms and clarifying misunderstandings. Translanguaging therefore positions multilingualism as a cognitive and epistemic resource rather than a problem requiring correction (Madiba, 2024; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023).

Translanguaging is related to code-switching, although the concepts place emphasis on different aspects of multilingual communication. Code-switching generally describes alternation between recognisable languages. Translanguaging focuses more closely on how speakers mobilise an integrated repertoire to achieve communicative and learning purposes. The analytical concern is therefore not only that a student moved from English to Tshivenda or Xitsonga but why that movement occurred and how it contributed to meaning-making. The student may have been clarifying a technical term, connecting theory with local experience or supporting a peer who had not understood the English explanation (McKinney & Tyler, 2024; Prinsloo, 2023).

Pedagogical translanguaging involves the deliberate organisation of classroom activities across languages. It differs from spontaneous code-switching or casual translation because the use of multiple languages is connected to defined learning outcomes. A lecturer may introduce a technical term in English, provide equivalents or explanatory phrases in several languages, invite multilingual group discussion and guide students to produce the disciplinary formulation expected in English. Such sequencing positions multilingual comprehension and mastery of academic English as complementary rather than contradictory goals (Madiba, 2024; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

Translanguaging can be organised across four interconnected stages: input, interaction, scaffolding and output. Input may include academic texts, lectures, multilingual glossaries, images, videos and subtitles. Interaction may involve peer explanation, group discussion, collaborative problem-solving and lecturer–student dialogue. Scaffolding can include terminology comparison, bilingual concept maps, local examples and writing frames. Output may involve an English assignment, a multilingual presentation, an oral explanation or another product aligned with the module outcomes. Planning across these stages ensures that multilingual practices serve a clear pedagogical function (Kruger-Roux et al., 2025; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

One of the principal benefits associated with translanguaging is improved conceptual understanding. Students can connect unfamiliar disciplinary terminology with concepts they already understand through other languages. This reduces the likelihood that they will memorise English definitions without understanding their underlying meaning. Comparing explanations across languages may also reveal differences in cultural interpretation and disciplinary usage. Translanguaging can consequently promote deeper engagement with knowledge rather than simply providing linguistic assistance (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023; Rajendram et al., 2023).

Translanguaging can also increase student confidence and participation. Students who hesitate to speak in formal English may be more willing to contribute when they can first formulate ideas using familiar linguistic resources. Multilingual peer discussion creates a lower-risk environment in which students can test interpretations, correct misunderstandings and prepare contributions for the wider class. This process can support the gradual

development of confidence in the formal academic language rather than permanently removing the need to use it (Rajendram et al., 2023; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

The recognition of students' linguistic repertoires also carries important implications for identity and belonging. When a university legitimises indigenous languages within teaching and learning, it communicates that the students' communities and ways of knowing have academic value. Students are not required to leave their linguistic identities outside the classroom before being recognised as legitimate participants. Translanguaging may therefore contribute to curriculum transformation by enabling students to connect academic knowledge with local histories, indigenous knowledge and community experience (Madiba, 2024; Makalela & Da Silva, 2023).

However, translanguaging is not automatically inclusive. If a lecturer repeatedly uses one locally dominant language, students from other language backgrounds may be excluded. Multilingual group work may also reinforce linguistic divisions if students interact only with speakers of the same language. Furthermore, inaccurate translations may distort specialised disciplinary concepts. Lecturers must therefore ensure that key conclusions are communicated in a language accessible to the entire class and that multilingual terminology is verified wherever accuracy is essential (Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2024; Yafele, 2024).

Pedagogical translanguaging does not require lecturers to speak every language represented in their classrooms. Lecturers can facilitate multilingual learning by surveying students' repertoires, organising supportive peer groups, providing multilingual terminology and allowing students to generate explanations in different languages. They can also collaborate with language practitioners, tutors and subject specialists. Their primary responsibility is to ensure disciplinary accuracy, equitable participation and alignment between multilingual activities and intended learning outcomes (Kruger-Roux et al., 2025; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

Digital technologies provide additional opportunities for translanguaging. Multilingual subtitles, digital dictionaries, electronic glossaries, translation applications, speech-recognition tools and learning-management systems can provide students with alternative routes to content. Audiovisual material can be presented with English and indigenous-language support, while students can replay explanations and compare terminology. However, automated translation may produce inaccurate disciplinary language, and unequal access to devices or data may reproduce existing inequalities. Digital multilingualism therefore requires academic oversight and equitable infrastructure (Kruger-Roux et al., 2025).

Assessment remains one of the greatest challenges facing translanguaging pedagogy. Lecturers may permit multilingual discussion during learning but require all assessed work to be produced in English. Although multilingual interaction can still improve comprehension, this arrangement leaves the principal gatekeeping mechanism largely unchanged. More equitable practices may include multilingual assessment instructions, bilingual glossaries, multilingual planning, scaffolded English writing and carefully moderated multilingual responses where qualified markers are available. Rubrics should clearly distinguish between disciplinary knowledge and language accuracy unless language proficiency is itself an intended outcome (Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025; Yafele, 2024).

Effective translanguaging consequently requires both ideological and practical transformation. Lecturers must first reject the assumption that multilingualism is an obstacle created by inadequately prepared students. They must then acquire concrete strategies for multilingual explanation, group organisation, terminology development and assessment. Evidence from South African teacher education suggests that structured professional development can help lecturers move from recognising linguistic diversity to accepting responsibility for designing multilingual learning environments (Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

Institutional support is equally important. Individual lecturers cannot independently develop terminology, translate learning materials, validate digital resources and establish multilingual assessment systems. Universities must provide language specialists, professional-development programmes, teaching assistants, translation resources and quality-assurance procedures. Without this support, translanguaging may remain

dependent on the personal linguistic abilities and goodwill of individual lecturers, producing inconsistent experiences across modules (Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025; Yafele, 2024).

Students should also participate in the design of multilingual pedagogy because they possess direct knowledge of how different linguistic resources support their learning. They can contribute to terminology banks, multilingual concept maps and peer-explanation activities. Nevertheless, students should not be treated as informal translators responsible for correcting gaps in institutional provision. Their linguistic agency should inform and enrich professionally supported multilingual systems rather than replace institutional responsibility (Rajendram et al., 2023; Reyneke & Kaiser, 2025).

In summary, translanguaging provides a theoretically grounded approach for connecting multilingual meaning-making with the development of recognised academic registers. It does not require universities to abandon English or reduce academic standards. Instead, it creates structured pathways through which students can use familiar resources to access disciplinary knowledge while acquiring the English and other specialised registers required for academic and professional participation. Its effective implementation depends on deliberate pedagogy, inclusive classroom norms, validated terminology, equitable assessment and sustained institutional support.

## Student and lecturer language practices

**Table 1: Common language practices in multilingual university classrooms**

| Actor and practice                                                    | Pedagogical function                                                                | Risk if unplanned                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Students: peer explanation in a shared language                       | Clarifies concepts and lowers the risk of public error.                             | Students who do not share the language may be excluded. |
| Students: multilingual notes and internal translation                 | Connects new disciplinary vocabulary with existing knowledge.                       | Equivalent terms may be inaccurate or unavailable.      |
| Students: multilingual group discussion followed by English reporting | Enables rich idea generation while developing academic English output.              | English reporting may conceal uneven participation.     |
| Lecturers: restatement, examples and code-switching                   | Scaffolds difficult concepts and signals that students' repertoires are legitimate. | Selective use may privilege one language group.         |
| Lecturers: multilingual terminology and glossaries                    | Builds disciplinary vocabulary across languages.                                    | Terminology requires validation and updating.           |
| Students and lecturers: digital translation, captions, and messaging  | Extends access beyond scheduled contact time.                                       | Automated translation may distort specialised meanings. |

Source: Author's synthesis of the reviewed literature.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis combines translanguaging theory, sociocultural learning theory, and Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital. These perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same classroom. Translanguaging theory explains how multilingual speakers mobilise an integrated repertoire to construct meaning. Sociocultural theory explains why language-mediated interaction, scaffolding, and collaboration can move students from

partial to more independent understanding. Linguistic capital explains why not all resources carry equal institutional value and why apparently neutral language rules can advantage particular groups.

Together, the perspectives prevent two analytical errors. The first is romanticising multilingual practice as automatically inclusive; a language used by the majority can silence a minority. The second is treating standard academic English as inherently oppressive; disciplinary registers can provide valuable access when they are taught explicitly and not used to stigmatise developing speakers. Inclusive multilingual pedagogy must therefore create flexible routes into learning while making the valued conventions of the discipline visible and attainable.

## METHODOLOGY

This article adopted a conceptual integrative-review design. This design is appropriate when the objective is to synthesise theoretical, empirical, and policy literature, identify relationships across a field, and generate a new organising framework. The review focused on scholarship concerning language use, multilingual pedagogy, translanguaging, language policy, epistemic access, and lecturer practice in higher education. Priority was given to South African and African higher-education studies, supplemented by influential international scholarship that clarified the principal concepts.

Literature was located through combinations of terms, including multilingual university classroom, language practices, translanguaging in higher education, lecturers, students, indigenous African languages, English-medium instruction, and South African higher education. Recent peer-reviewed work was prioritised, while foundational theoretical sources and the national language-policy framework were retained where necessary. Sources were included when they addressed classroom language practice, student or lecturer experience, pedagogical implications, assessment, or institutional implementation. Material focused solely on school classrooms was used selectively when it clarified a transferable pedagogical principle.

Analysis proceeded through iterative thematic synthesis. Claims and recommendations were grouped under language patterns, educational benefits, risks, assessment, lecturer capability, and institutional conditions. Relationships among these categories were then compared against the three theoretical lenses. The resulting themes informed the Inclusive Multilingual University Classroom Framework. Because the article analyses published documents and contains no human participants, institutional ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

## RESULTS

### English as both a bridge and a gatekeeper

The synthesis indicates that English performs a double function. It bridges students from different language groups and gives access to internationally circulating scholarship, yet it can also regulate who speaks confidently and whose knowledge appears academically legitimate. Students may understand a concept but hesitate to contribute because they fear grammatical judgement or an accent-based response. Conversely, students with high English proficiency may be mistaken for stronger thinkers because they can display knowledge in the preferred register. The educational task is therefore to preserve the connective value of English while separating conceptual ability from premature language judgement during learning.

### Students as active multilingual meaning-makers

Students do not passively receive the official language of instruction. They compare terms across languages, use home-language explanations in study groups, produce bilingual notes, consult relatives or peers, and use messaging platforms to continue explanations outside class. These practices constitute forms of learner agency. They are particularly valuable during concept formation, when students need to connect unfamiliar academic abstractions with prior knowledge. However, student-led multilingualism cannot substitute for institutional provision because access then depends on friendship networks, dominant campus languages, and the availability of knowledgeable peers.

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## **Lecturer practices: from spontaneous accommodation to planned design**

Lecturers' multilingual practices range from prohibition through tolerance to deliberate design. Spontaneous code-switching can resolve an immediate misunderstanding but may be inconsistent and may favour the lecturer's strongest language. Planned multilingual pedagogy begins with learning outcomes and identifies where multilingual resources can assist: activating prior knowledge, explaining threshold concepts, structuring group interaction, checking understanding, building terminology, and preparing assessed output. This approach does not require every lecturer to speak every student's language. It requires facilitation strategies, multilingual resources, peer structures, and willingness to share linguistic authority.

### **Participation, identity, and epistemic access**

When students' languages are recognised, participation can shift from mere physical presence to epistemic inclusion. Students are more able to ask questions, test interpretations, and contribute examples rooted in local experience. Such recognition also challenges the assumption that knowledge becomes academic only when expressed in English. Nevertheless, inclusion requires carefully designed norms: students should be allowed to use multilingual resources, but the lecturer must ensure that key ideas are made accessible to the whole class through summaries, translations, captions, or shared reporting.

### **Assessment as the critical pressure point**

Assessment is where multilingual commitments most often narrow. Classroom discussion may be flexible, while assignments and examinations remain in English. Some standardisation is necessary for fairness, professional expectations, and reliable marking, but language proficiency should not obscure achievement of disciplinary outcomes unless language itself is being assessed. Equitable options include multilingual planning before English submission, bilingual glossaries, explicit teaching of academic genres, oral clarification of task instructions, transparent rubrics separating content from language where appropriate, and carefully piloted multilingual responses supported by qualified markers. The objective is comparable intellectual demand, not reduced standards.

### **Institutional constraints**

Six recurring constraints limit implementation: linguistically diverse classes in which no single African language reaches everyone; uneven lecturer proficiency; limited disciplinary terminology; restricted teaching time; assessment and quality-assurance conventions; and the symbolic dominance of English. These constraints explain why policy declarations alone produce limited change. Sustainable practice depends on coordinated language plans, lecturer development, terminology projects, educational technology, student consultation, and monitoring who benefits and who remains excluded.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings demonstrate that language usage in multilingual university classrooms is a pedagogical system rather than a collection of isolated choices. Student strategies, lecturer practices, assessment rules, and institutional policy interact. If one component remains monolingual, it can neutralise progress elsewhere. For example, multilingual classroom dialogue may improve comprehension, but students may still fail if academic writing conventions remain implicit. Similarly, a glossary has little effect if lecturers discourage students from using it during discussion.

The synthesis also clarifies the relationship between multilingualism and academic English. Inclusive multilingualism is not the abandonment of English. It is a scaffolded redistribution of linguistic resources across stages of learning. Students may encounter content through an English text, discuss it through flexible multilingual interaction, consult multilingual terminology, and produce an English or otherwise approved assessment response. Movement across these stages helps students gain disciplinary knowledge and the dominant academic register rather than forcing them to choose between the two.

From the perspective of linguistic capital, this redistribution has a justice function. It reduces the extent to which prior access to elite English determines classroom visibility. From a sociocultural perspective, it expands the mediational tools available for learning. From a translanguaging perspective, it aligns pedagogy with the actual repertoires of multilingual speakers. Yet the framework must remain critical: multilingual participation is not equitable if a regionally dominant language simply replaces English as the new gatekeeper.

## Inclusive Multilingual University Classroom Framework

**Table 2: Inclusive Multilingual University Classroom Framework**

| Dimension                    | Core practices                                                                                                                                                | Primary responsibility                                   | Expected outcome                                              |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Recognition                  | Map classroom repertoires; establish inclusive language norms; treat linguistic diversity as an academic resource.                                            | Lecturers and students                                   | Belonging, visibility, and informed planning                  |
| Purposeful pedagogy          | Use multilingual brainstorming, peer explanation, terminology comparison, multimodal input, and whole-class summaries.                                        | Lecturers, tutors, and students                          | Conceptual understanding and wider participation              |
| Equitable assessment support | Clarify tasks, teach academic genres, provide glossaries, separate content and language criteria where appropriate, and pilot validated multilingual options. | Lecturers, departments, and quality-assurance structures | A fairer demonstration of learning without lowering standards |
| Institutional enablement     | Develop language plans, terminology banks, staff learning, translation/captioning support, technology and implementation monitoring.                          | University leadership, faculties and language units      | Sustainable and accountable multilingual practice             |

Source: Author's conceptual framework.

The framework is cyclical. Recognition supplies information for pedagogical planning; classroom experience reveals assessment barriers; assessment outcomes identify institutional support needs; and institutional monitoring reshapes the next cycle of recognition. It is also deliberately distributed. Students should exercise linguistic agency, but they should not carry the burden of translating an under-designed curriculum. Lecturers should design inclusive learning, but they cannot individually create terminology, translation systems, and quality-assurance rules. Institutional responsibility is therefore indispensable.

Implementation can begin with low-risk practices: a linguistic-repertoire survey, multilingual keyword lists, structured peer explanation, captioned resources, student-produced terminology banks reviewed by lecturers, and end-of-class summaries in the common instructional language. Departments can then pilot more substantial assessment changes in modules where language is not the object of assessment. Each pilot should evaluate comprehension, participation, achievement, student experience, and unintended exclusion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities should convert institutional language policies into faculty and module-level implementation plans with measurable responsibilities, budgets, and review cycles. Plans should identify priority disciplines, languages, terminology needs, digital resources, and indicators of student access rather than merely restating national commitments.

Lecturer development should combine critical language awareness with practical course design. Training should demonstrate how to plan multilingual learning sequences, facilitate linguistically mixed groups, verify terminology, distinguish language outcomes from content outcomes, and use translation or captioning technologies critically.

Departments should establish collaborative terminology practices involving subject specialists, language practitioners, and students. Terms should include definitions, examples, and usage notes, rather than relying solely on word-for-word equivalents. Open digital glossaries can be updated as disciplines develop.

Assessment reform should be incremental and evidence-based. Universities should begin with multilingual instructions, glossaries, planning, and formative feedback, followed by carefully moderated pilots of multilingual responses where qualified assessment capacity exists. Rubrics must make clear when language accuracy is an outcome and when it is a supporting convention.

Students should be recognised as co-designers of multilingual pedagogy. Regular feedback should identify which practices support understanding, which languages are excluded, and whether multilingual activities unintentionally reinforce group divisions. Student agency should inform institutional provision, not replace it.

## CONCLUSION

Language usage in multilingual university classrooms reveals both the persistence of linguistic inequality and the creative resources students and lecturers already use to learn. English remains important for cross-group communication, academic mobility, and international scholarship, but English-only practices can restrict participation and disguise conceptual competence. Translanguaging offers a productive alternative when it is purposeful, inclusive, and connected to disciplinary outcomes. The proposed Inclusive Multilingual University Classroom Framework links recognition, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional enablement. Its central principle is complementarity: students should develop powerful academic registers while using their full linguistic repertoires to access knowledge. Achieving this goal requires coordinated responsibility, not occasional translation. Universities must move from policy symbolism to designed classroom practice, supported lecturers, equitable assessment, and accountable implementation.

## Limitations And Future Research

As a conceptual synthesis, the article does not measure the prevalence or effects of specific language practices within a particular institution. Future research should test the framework across historically advantaged and disadvantaged universities, disciplines, class sizes, and language constellations. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies should examine learning outcomes, participation patterns, lecturer workload, assessment reliability, and student identity. Attention is needed to South African Sign Language, digitally mediated multilingualism, multilingual artificial intelligence tools, and students whose home languages are not regionally dominant.

## Ethical Approval

Not applicable. The study is a conceptual integrative review based exclusively on published literature and policy documents and involved no human or animal participants.

## Informed Consent

Not applicable.

## Data Availability

No new dataset was generated or analysed. All sources used in the conceptual synthesis are publicly identifiable in the reference list.

## Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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## Author Contributions

Israel Creleanor Mulaudzi: conceptualisation, methodology, literature synthesis, framework development, writing—original draft, and project administration. Ndivhudzannyi Michael Nndwamato: conceptual refinement, literature interpretation, writing, review and editing, and validation. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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