

## **Translanguaging as an approach to address language inequality in South African higher education: summary writing skills development**

Sandiso Ngcobo<sup>1</sup>, Nobuhle Ndaba, Bulelwa Nyangiwe, Njabulo Mpungose and Rafiq Jamal  
*Mangosuthu University of Technology, South Africa*

*(Received 26 August 2016; accepted 7 December 2016)*

### **Abstract**

Literacy challenges among the majority of African-language speaking students learning through the medium of English impact on unequal throughput in South African higher education. To address this social injustice issue, academic literacy practitioners have a critical role to play in the inclusion of linguistic diversity in higher education. This requires that the curriculum be revised in such a way that classroom activities and assessments give recognition to students' African languages. In this paper, we outline how translanguaging as a teaching and learning approach promises to develop literacy in both the students' African languages and English. The paper describes a summary skills development teaching approach and its accompanying activities which enable the students to move between isiZulu and English. The summary writing activities are followed by a guided reflection note from students on their perceptions and experiences of the new communicative approach that has been introduced to them. The majority of participants express positive perceptions of this approach as they find it familiar to what they are used to doing when learning on their own. It is hoped that the translanguaging approach would contribute to the promotion of equality in language and literacy development in the South African higher education sector.

**Keywords:** translanguaging, biliteracy, equality, summary writing, reflections

### **Introduction**

South Africa is a multilingual country with several policies that grant official recognition to its various languages. At a societal level there is the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996) that for the first time after the democratic elections of 1994 accorded official status to 9 African languages that are spoken by the great majority of the citizens of the country. Census 2011 data estimates the population at about 52 million, of which 79.2% are indigenous Africans (Statistics South Africa, 2012). This political recognition was long overdue for the previous oppressive regime and period colonialism had not respected black people and all that belonged to them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author email: sandiso@mut.ac.za

In the domain of education the available policies and directives include the Language in Education Policy (Department of Education (DoE) 1997); the Higher Education Act (RSA 1997); the Language Policy for Higher Education (DoE 2002); the South African Languages Bill (RSA, 2011); and the Use of Official Languages Act No. 12 (RSA, 2012). In addition to these multilingual government policies, there are institutional language policies for respective schools and universities to ensure that policies are also implemented from the bottom up. All these different policies purport to recognise and promise to promote African languages as media of communication, instruction and assessment in education.

Yet English, which is spoken by a mere 8.2% of the population as a home language, remains the dominant language of instruction in South Africa with devastating results. Census 2011 notes that the continued use of English in education has not brought about much success for the majority of Africans. This concern is attributed to the fact that in 2012 only 35.2% of black people, against an overwhelming 76% of whites, had managed to obtain a school exit qualification, known as the National Senior Certificate, in which performance in English plays an important role (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Similarly, the ministerial task team on the National Senior Certificate found that there was no correlation between African students' performance in their home language (L1) and their overall pass rate as compared to that of English and Afrikaans first language speakers. The task team ironically attributes this discrepancy to weaker standards of African languages examination papers (Department of Basic Education, 2014). This is instead of considering the high pass rate in African languages as an indication that the students' stronger language should be pursued as a medium of instruction. In so doing, the task team would be acknowledging the multilingual capital that the African students bring with them into education (Mashiya, 2014: 147). This recognition should extend to universities, the focus area of this article, where the pass and graduation rates among African students are reported to be appallingly low (CHE, 2013; Letseka and Maile, 2008; SAPA, 2008; Scott, 2012).

Webb (2013) expresses similar sentiments when he laments the continued detrimental state of linguistic dominance that exists despite the speakers of African languages being in political and administrative positions of power in the democratic South Africa. These administrative positions can be taken to include those in various levels of education where Africans should be driving transformation through the implementation of multilingual policies. Their failure to do so, as noted by Mwindi and van der Walt (2015) means that having English as a second language continues to be an additional barrier to both teaching and learning for previously academically disadvantaged groups who become even more disadvantaged. The plight of the previously disadvantaged in South Africa is confirmed by a report released by the CHE (2013) which reveals that equity has not been achieved as the completion rate for white students is on average 50% higher than that for African students who will be taught in English or Afrikaans only. It is important to note that an earlier study found that the academic challenges experienced by the majority of African students were attributable 'not only to the English medium, but also to the type of literacy they were expected to produce' which did not recognise their background (Bangenji and Kapp 2007: 257). Childs (2016) and Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) similarly express strong views when they label the exclusive use of European languages in South Africa as a dehumanising experience for the vast majority of African citizens in their own democratic

country. Gumbi (2014: 183) equally considers the continued use of English and Afrikaans, as during apartheid, at the university under his investigation as an injustice to the speakers of isiZulu and Sesotho. In his words:

Abafundi bezilimi zomdabu (isiZulu nesiSuthu) abakutholi lokhu kunethezeka nelungelo lokusebenzisa ezabo izilimi ...Ubulungiswa abenzeki.

African-language speaking students (isiZulu and Sesotho) do not have the same freedom of using their own languages. ...There is no justice. (First author transl.)

One essential literacy skill that English second language (ESL) students are expected to display throughout their academic and professional life is summary writing. However, they find it difficult and daunting to master this form of literacy, mainly due to their limited vocabulary in English which impacts negatively on their ability to paraphrase passages (Choy and Lee, 2012; Dehkordi and Shafiee, 2016; Idris, Baba and Abdullah, 2011). Other than language impediments, students lack the skill to identify the most important points in a text. This was found to be the case by Choy and Lee (2012) among Malaysian ESL university students even though they had been taught the same skill at school level. In a few cases, the students would simply lift the sentences that carried the main ideas without making an effort to paraphrase them. As a solution, the adoption of students' language of common use (L1) as a teaching and learning tool (Choy and Lee, 2012, citing Orellana & Reynolds, 2008) to scaffold academic discourses (Paxton, 2009) can help students to overcome their ordeals (Visedo, 2013).

The adoption of students' L1 alongside English as a teaching and learning resource would help to bring about equity and justice in similar situations. In South Africa the development of African language translations for academic purposes is also an urgent matter (Paxton, 2009). It is encouraging to note that the Language Policy for Higher Education (DoE, 2002) has long advocated the promotion of multilingualism in education as a way to address issues of inequality in education. Such an approach has generally been dubbed bi-/multilingual education with a variety of terms used to refer to variations of related approaches. One appropriate teaching and learning approach 'that has gained traction in academia' (Mazak, 2016: 1) and is worth further exploring is *translanguaging* because not much has been done in this respect to attempt specific translanguaging strategies (Mwinda and van der Walt, 2015). Moreover, the approach is apt for the South African context because the adoption of planned and structured translanguaging activities make a teacher able to contribute meaningfully to 'a transformative pedagogy' (García & Wei, 2014: 92) that can address issues of inequality in education. In the same spirit, Boakye and Mbirini (2015) emphasise the need for South African educators to take an active role in using translanguaging as a pedagogical tool in order to promote academic literacy in multilingual contexts.

Most importantly for this article, a transformative pedagogy of this nature should allow students to reflect on their learning processes as they grapple with the new communicative practices that are associated with translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2011; Street, 2011). A researcher who adopts an approach that recognises the power of students' voices

may be in a better position to organise improved future pedagogical practices that can contribute to equality in education (Canagarajah, 2011; Paxton, 2012). It is in this context that this article discusses translanguaging activities in a South African higher education context and provides the participants' views on them. The question the study sought to answer related to how the students perceived the planned summary writing translanguaging activities in their academic literacy classroom.

### **Translanguaging and biliteracy development**

The term translanguaging is among many terms associated with bi-/multilingual education. The term is understood differently by different scholars with some confusion with other related concepts. For instance, Childs (2016) notes that while translanguaging, like code-switching and translation, fits within work on multilingualism it is, however, not the same as the other two concepts. Childs (2016) argues that the distinction is evident in that code-switching and translation are responsive, while translanguaging is a planned teaching strategy. The confusion can be attributed to the fact that translanguaging is a new and developing term (Lewis, Jones and Baker 2012) that serves to fill a gap in the description of language practices in multilingual educational settings (Mazak, 2016). It then becomes imperative to clarify what translanguaging entails.

In this respect, Velasco and García (2014) assert that translanguaging is not about the usage of separate languages in education. Rather, it is 'the flexible and meaningful actions through which bilinguals select features in their linguistic repertoire in order to communicate appropriately' (Velasco and García, 2014: 7). An example could be when students are required to extract the main ideas in a text by drawing from their entire language repertoire to demonstrate what they know and can do with any language rather than within the confines of a defined medium of instruction (García, in Grosjean, 2016; García and Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García and Reid, 2015). This could include students receiving information in one language and reproducing it in another language (Mazak, 2016, citing Baker, 2006), such as when they read in English and write a summary in an African language. A teacher that adopts this approach, particularly in a context where the students' first language is not the medium of instruction, engages in a democratic endeavour for social justice because they do not undermine the students' right to learn in a language of their choice or that with which they are most familiar (Velasco and García, 2014, citing García, 2013). Hornberger and Link (2012: 242) explain that such an activity affords students the opportunity to display their ability to 'shuttle between languages' (citing Canagarajah, 2011) or between 'language varieties' (citing Garcia, 2009) in order 'to foster language and literacy development'. This can be achieved by enabling students to work in collaborative groupings using their home language resources to decode a text presented in the dominant educational language. The advantage of this approach is that it does not require the facilitator to be familiar with students' different home languages because it is students who work together using their common languages to produce a text in the dominant language of instruction (García, in Grosjean, 2016). The disadvantage, though, is that in cases where some students cannot speak any of the African languages in class they may well feel left out. In that case, the students would be expected to draw from their previous experience in school where they would have developed the same academic literacy skill in their L1.

The role of academic literacy skills during schooling years is noted by Visedo (2013). Visedo reports perceptions of disillusionment among her three Hispanic research participants - all student teachers - about the United States of America's (USA) educational system that appears to be ill-informed about their education background which they believed had adequately prepared them for higher education in an L2 (English) in terms of the academic literacy skills already developed in L1 (Spanish) at school level. However, on participation in a bilingual programme it was found that the participants had positive perceptions of biliteracy education. In this regard, the term biliteracy is defined 'as any instance in which communication takes place in two (or more) languages around a written text' (Street, 2011: 60) in order to facilitate the development of plural literacy skills. Most importantly, Visedo's (2013) study found that as future teachers the participants thought that biliteracy would enable them to advocate empowerment for other linguistic minority members in the USA so that they would not feel alienated by the educational system. This suggests that these participants perceived a long-term benefit of biliteracy not only to themselves as they were studying but also to members of their society who are Spanish-speakers.

A similar positive attitude among students in South Africa could mean that students would view translanguaging as a form of empowerment that would enable them to advocate equality for the majority of African language speakers they will interact with in their communities as the future workforce. This would suggest broadmindedness on the part of South African students who think beyond themselves, but also the majority of citizens they are preparing to serve in their nation. In the same vein, Makalela (2016) refers to translanguaging as an educational approach that recognises language alternation as a norm in contemporary societies, which he calls Ubuntu (humanity). However, in a South African higher education context Boakye and Mbirini (2015) and Mashiyi (2014) did not find this thinking among lecturers. The contradiction was that while the lecturers acknowledged the role of African languages in promoting effective teaching and learning they also insisted that students use English only.

In response to these ambivalent attitudes, Boakye and Mbirini (2015: 172) assert that there is a need to 'move away from a monolingual bias' by encouraging students in translanguaging practices that will provide them with 'a positive experience in academic literacy modules'. It is in this respect that translanguaging practice is beneficial because of its emancipatory nature 'to disrupt the power imbalances of languages' (Childs, 2016: 25). Childs (2016, citing Garcia 2014: 3) argues this point by noting that translanguaging is defined as 'complex discursive practices that include all language practices of students in order to develop new language practices and sustain old ones'. This means that the use of students' home language should not only be viewed as a way to develop academic literacy skills in English but also the same skills in African languages. It, however, remains to be investigated whether or not students would reflect on a summary writing translanguaging experience in a positive manner.

Writing is an important area to explore in an academic literacy module that employs translanguaging because it has been ignored due to 'a strong opinion among some scholars that translanguaging is not permitted in writing' (Canagarajah, 2011: 6). García and Leiva (2014: 200, citing Baker, 2001) note that the term translanguaging originally referred to the alternative use of different languages for the purposes of reading and writing. Scholars who

still keep to this original meaning view translanguaging as a process whereby ‘students hear or read a lesson, a passage in a book or section of a text in one language and develop their work in another’ language (Hornberger & Link, 2012: 242). In this context it would mean asking students to read a text that is in English and producing a summary in an African language, and the other way round. It is with this understanding that the original view of translanguaging should not be dismissed as outdated but rather as an indication of options that are available for consideration depending on the need and ‘the language repertoires of learners and the teacher’ (Childs, 2016: 26). For example, in an educational environment where one African language dominates among students it will be easy to allow students to shuttle between two languages. They could, for instance, read a text in an African language and summarise it in English. Sensitivity would still need to be exercised such that the speakers of other African languages, no matter how few, do not feel alienated, dehumanised and less worthy (Childs, 2016) particularly in ‘the complex, multilingual nature of South African universities’ (Boakye & Mbirini, 2015: 170). Otherwise the situation could be viewed as unethical and a perpetuation of language supremacy, inequality and tribalism.

Barton’s (2007: 22) and Street’s (2011: 60) New Literacy Studies (NLS) is related to the investigations of perceptions and experiences of translanguaging and biliteracy. In this regard, Street (2011: 60) defines literacy by making a distinction between an ‘autonomous’ model and ‘ideological’ model of literacy. In this distinction Street (2011) views the ‘autonomous’ model as a common approach to the study of literacy that aims to impose the Western conceptions of literacy (citing Street, 2001). He then advocates the ‘ideological’ model as a new approach that is culturally sensitive to various literacy practices that exist in different contexts. In the same manner, translanguaging and biliteracy acknowledge language diversity among citizens of a country such as South Africa. The type of literacy conception that is deemed ‘ideological’ ‘is always contested, both its meanings and its practices’ (Street, 2011: 61). This suggests that ‘ideas about literacy held by the participants’ are not as neutral as educational policy perspectives may attempt to describe such learning and practices (Street, 2011: 61). It has been found that lecturers’ ideas about translanguaging (Boakye and Mbirini 2015; Mashiya 2014) contradict the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) as well as related language policies alluded to at the beginning of the article, and this may be the case for students too. Of significance to the current study is that the ideological model approach is not focused on the ‘impact’ of literacy but rather on how participants ‘take hold’ of (Street, 2011) or ‘uptake’ (Canagarajah, 2011) the new communicative practices being introduced to them. Gentil (2010) is also critical of studies that follow bilingual writing activities with an investigation of task effects or writing proficiency. Instead, Gentil (2010: 9-10) advocates that future research in L2 writing should aim to shed light on ‘the nature of writing proficiency and its variability across genre-specific writing tasks’. In the same vein, this article investigates students’ experiences of the development of their summary writing skills using a translanguaging approach.

\*

Canagarajah (2011) argues that teachers should go beyond analysing linguistic realisations of instances of translanguaging and focus on questions of process. Some of the questions Canagarajah (2011) and Street (2011) suggest should be directed to students are:

- What strategies do translanguagers adopt to help readers/listeners interpret their language choices?
- What choices did students face in codes and conversions in their production?
- What considerations help students resolve their choices?
- What are the resources?
- Where are students going if they take on one literacy rather than another literacy?

A study taking such a direction could further ask student participants to indicate whether or not they perceive any value in a translanguaging educational approach in their immediate and future needs. This type of a question will be important because of the understanding that literacy is a social practice due to a link between educational contexts and attitudes on the role of language in identity and the job market (Street, 2003: 77-78). The above questions as suggested by Canagarajah (2011) and Street (2011) could be useful guidelines for research that aims to gather information on participants' ideologies about translanguaging and biliteracy. Moreover, they would help teachers adopt a translanguaging approach with a better understanding of how it works (Canagarajah, 2011) and how bilingual writers do transfer 'culture-specific genre knowledge across languages' (Gentil, 2010: 16). This would then make it easy for teachers to effectively utilise translanguaging such that it brings about greater equality in education and in society.

Gentil (2010), however, raises a concern that despite the numerous benefits of a biliteracy approach there is limited research in postsecondary and professional contexts. Hence, this study focuses on postsecondary and professional contexts of the participants. Paxton (2012: 383) notes that despite the existence of a tradition of research aimed at understanding written text and particularly academic texts 'in this tradition little consideration has been given to the contexts and the practices surrounding the production of these texts'. She further asserts that an investigation of 'the practices surrounding the writing of the text, may allow for a narrowing of the text-context gap so that the researcher can get closer access to the writer's voice' (Paxton, 2012: 384). It remains to be seen, however, whether students would embrace such an approach.

Scepticism is raised due to prior research that indicates conflicting views of many African language speakers on the use of African languages in an educational environment. They feel that it interferes with their English development which they so desire in a world where English is often referred to as the main language of national and international communication, which also enables one to participate in the economy. For instance, Parmegiani and Rudwick (2014: 114-115) note that many of their participants indicated they were not comfortable using their mother tongue in an academic setting. The participants attributed this discomfort to the fact that during their schooling they had not had the opportunity to develop strong academic literacy skills in their mother tongue. This is in contrast to perception studies conducted in South African school environments where the overwhelming majority of the participants were positive about the supportive role of their L1 in L2 educational experience (Rudwick, 2006). In view of the negative perceptions towards L1 at South African university level, Parmegiani and Rudwick (2014: 119) conclude their

findings by suggesting that ‘it is essential that the promotion of isiZulu be complemented with the promotion of a higher level of English proficiency’.

This suggestion implies that in instances where a particular literacy skill is taught and practised in both L1 and L2, students might be comfortable using L1 in higher education. The taught skill should therefore be developed in both English and an African language for the biliteracy approach to be positively viewed by participants. The use of an African language alongside English might, however, need to be aligned with students’ own bilingual language and literacy practices for biliteracy to be perceived positively (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Parmegiani and Rudwick, 2014). Success in this regard requires engaging university students in academic and professional activities that are relevant to their study programmes. Moreover, the use of L1 should play a supportive role in the transfer of already learned skills to the L2.

Summary writing, the focus activity in this article, is indeed an academic skill required across many academic programmes. This includes students shortening longer prescribed texts to demonstrate comprehension and readiness for various assessments. Summarising skills are also required in many professions, such as secretarial positions, in the taking of telephonic messages and minutes of meetings, general administrative work, legal work and in the health professions where summaries are needed on patients’ conditions and treatment. In multilingual countries where, for instance, a former colonial language such as English or French dominates in the academic and professional environment it is important to communicate information across languages. For instance, a professional might discuss the client’s query in the client’s African language but record it in English as part of record keeping. However, summarising is a challenging task for most ESL students due to their limited vocabulary, which affects their ability to paraphrase passages (Choy and Lee, 2012; Idris, Baba and Abdullah, 2011). One useful resource could be the use of L1 in an educational and professional environment where L2 dominates and is therefore sought by students during their training. In this instance, L1 could serve as a resource to the development of academic and professional skills in L2 (Choy and Lee 2012, citing Orellana and Reynolds, 2008). This would be a transformative approach against a background where:

[S]econd language students are often subjected to remedial English language programmes that stigmatise them as deficient in the English language and fail to acknowledge or take into account the multilingual capital that these students bring with them into higher education (Mashiya, 2014: 147).

According to Childs (2016: 23) this remedial practice is ‘dehumanising’ as it suggests that learners who are not skilled in the dominant language are ‘deficient and insufficient’. This type of remedial approach to English development is prevalent both in countries where L2 speakers are immigrants and in the minority and, sadly, where they are in the majority in their own country.

## **Methodology**

The study reported here adopts a qualitative approach and is descriptive in nature (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell, 2005). The participants provided written notes in response to guiding

questions about the process and perception of engaging in translanguaging and biliteracy activities on summary writing. In this sense, the study was conducted as an action research project in that it enabled the participants to self-reflect on the new teaching approach (Ellis, 2012). The written questions the students had to respond to were:

1. Did you think in isiZulu (L1) in order to write English (L2) activities and vice versa?
2. Which language was easy to summarise in?
3. Were there challenges in summarising across languages, such as reading an isiZulu text and then summarising it in English (translanguaging and biliteracy)?
4. Was this a worthwhile approach in developing your summarising skills when looking to the present and the future?

The various responses were then compiled thematically in order to gauge their pedagogical implications in the conclusion to the current study.

The activities that preceded this data gathering exercise were structured such that the participants could summarise in the original language by drawing from their language repertoire (Garcia, in Grosjean 2016) or read a ‘text in one language and develop their work in another’ language. This means that the participants had to summarise in either the same text language or across languages. The focus of the reported study is on students’ reflection on some of the biliteracy and translanguaging activities rather than on their academic impact and language fluency in conducting the set tasks (Canagarajah, 2011; Gentil, 2010 & Street, 2011). The sampling of participants was purposive in that the researcher deliberately selected students that were considered appropriate for the translanguaging task (Kumar, 2012). The participants were a group of 38 first-year African language-speaking students registered in 2016 for an English academic literacy course. The study was registered in the higher education institution that forms the context of the study, which is predominantly African in its student population. The study received ethical clearance and the participants were informed of their right not to participate in the study and assured of anonymity.

### **Data analysis**

The focus of the reported study is on students’ reflection on some of the biliteracy and translanguaging activities indicated above rather than on their academic impact and language fluency in conducting the set tasks. The findings are described thematically following the guiding questions provided to the participants for use in their short reflection notes (see above). The students were permitted to respond in either English or isiZulu or a combination of English and isiZulu. The researchers identified and described patterns that emerged from the collected data under three themes.

### **Findings**

#### *Translanguaging*

The student participants acknowledged that they transferred knowledge and skills across languages in completing the tasks (Velasco and Garcia, 2014) in what Cummins (2008) calls transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies. The data below show that students used their knowledge of the two different languages to complete various tasks. Comments by some of the participants are recorded below:

*Translanguaging as an approach to address language inequality in higher education*

*Once you understand an English passage in Zulu you can translate it into English.*

*I transfer from Zulu to English.*

*I had to read the Zulu text over and over again until I fully understood it.*

*I took the Zulu passage changed it to English [in my mind] then summarized it to isiZulu.*

*Translating to isiZulu was difficult to me because there are words that I can't translate to isiZulu because I only know them in English.*

Participants indicated that they shuttle across languages in order to make sense of difficult words in both languages. They viewed the process of reformulating a text from one language to another as 'translation and interpretation' (Cervantes-Kelly, 2010: 43). This was done in both English and isiZulu activities. The approach adopted by participants was expected in the light of previous studies in South Africa that indicate that the use of L1 in making sense of the curriculum is common among students learning in an L2 (Mashiya, 2014; Paxton, 2012). The interesting contribution made by the current findings is that L2 is also acknowledged by participants as useful in making sense of L1. However, some participants indicated that they found it difficult to use isiZulu due to their insufficient vocabulary.

As Canagarajah (2011) notes, it is important to understand what resources and processes students engage in to address linguistic challenges so as to inform and improve our future teaching (Canagarajah, 2011). It emerged that in instances where the participants experienced linguistic challenges they worked in consultation with one another, their lecturer or used other resources. This is illustrated in excerpts from their interviews:

*I ask people who understand isiZulu better if there are certain words or phrases that are used.*

*I read a dictionary and transferred meaning to Zulu words or language.*

*Search from Google.*

*I also use Internet to search information.*

*I ask the lecturer for hints.*

Elsewhere, similar findings are also noted in Paxton (2012) among isiXhosa-speaking students in South Africa and in Visedo's (2013) study conducted in the USA among L2 students. Visedo (2013) reports that the participants attributed their success to the relevance of their background Spanish L1 literacy. Most importantly, the participants expressed gratitude for the 'powerful help' they received from their families which enabled them 'to

overcome their ordeals' (Visedo, 2013: 198). In the current study it is also worth noting that some of the participants acknowledged developing the summarising skill in their L1 while they were at school:

*It was easy to summarise in isiZulu because we also learnt to summarise in isiZulu at school.*

*We were taught and tested on how to summarise in Zulu and English in school.*

This background experience can be said to have enabled the participants to draw from their 'vernacular learning strategies' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 14) in order to complete the tasks at hand. This affirms an observation made by Bangeni and Kapp (2007: 266) to the effect that 'school backgrounds influence language attitudes, practices and access to resources'.

#### *Challenges in summarizing across languages*

The study also aimed to find out from the participants if they experienced any challenges in completing the biliteracy tasks. Despite the positive reports noted above, there were concerns raised by the participant around language usage across activities. These are illustrated by the following excerpts:

*To summarise in English is difficult but it is more easier in isiZulu.*

*I got it quite easy to summarise in isiZulu because instead of using hard words isiZulu can just simplify words.*

*It was easy to write in Zulu, even though it was difficult sometimes to get specific [short] words.*

*It was easy to summarise texts in English than in isiZulu.*

*Some Zulu words were not easy although isiZulu is my home language.*

*Words in isiZulu are long.*

The information provided by the participants indicates that the activities were not easy for all of them in both languages used. While the majority found it easy to transfer knowledge and skills across languages others, however, struggled. These challenges could be attributed to the fact that the minority of the participants either did not study isiZulu at school or learnt it as a second language. In other instances the participants struggled with L2 as compared to their L1. Many students who study in situations where an L2 dominates experience difficulties with English as an L2 in the South African context of literacy challenges (Mothibeli, 2005; Webb, 2013). At the same time, it points to a situation in which knowledge of L1 as a home language, such as isiZulu, cannot be equated to its use in an academic context when one has

not been schooled in that way. Paxton (2009) attributes this challenge to students' unfamiliarity with new academic concepts. As a possible solution to this challenge, Paxton (2009) recommends the urgent need to find time and space in the curricula to scaffold learning by using a range of languages and discourses to negotiate meaning.

*Value of the translanguaging learning approach*

The study was interested to find out from the participants whether they perceived any value in this type of translanguaging approach to reading and summary writing skills development. One of the benefits noted by participants suggests that the activities contributed to their vocabulary development in both languages, as indicated below:

*I translate Zulu words to English.*

*I use a dictionary.*

*I change the whole story to English to summarise it well.*

*In the process of translating you think of short phrases which will be brief.*

*Changing the summary from English to isiZulu required some thinking.*

As the participants shuttled across languages they were able to either tap into their existing vocabulary or develop it. They developed their vocabulary in both languages as they read the texts and as they searched for meaning of challenging words through consultation with classmates, lecturers, dictionaries and the Internet. Cummins (1979) refers to this notion as linguistic interdependence. Most importantly, in the process of doing all this they developed their cognitive skills because the activities that required them to move across languages made them think about the correct use of language and related vocabulary. The findings therefore indicate that the bilingual tasks enable the writers to transfer 'culture-specific genre knowledge across languages' (Gentil, 2010: 16). The results are also in line with Dehkordi and Shafiee's (2016) study which found summary writing exercises to be an effective means of providing a context for vocabulary meaning, form and use enhancement.

Another important value is that the translanguaging process contributed to the development of lifelong skills that students could use in their daily lives and in their professions. This means that the translanguaging approach could enable them to advocate empowerment for linguistically marginalised members of their society. This was expressed in the notes written by the different participants:

*When reading something in English I usually think about it in Zulu in order to understand it.*

*It will help me should I work among isiZulu people when I have to write reports in English.*

*It makes me see the importance of my Zulu language for communicating and learning instead of doing everything in English.*

*It helps us improve our English.*

The participants' responses suggest that the approach was in line with at least some students' learning approach. The students acknowledge that they draw from their L1 in order to make sense of what they learn in L2. As noted above, they also do the same when confronted with information in L1. This indicates that the participants are used to shuttling between languages in their studies and in general. The findings are parallel to Mashiyi's argument that the mixing of languages 'promotes sense-making and access to the curriculum' (2014: 153). Moreover, the findings are consistent with earlier studies in which it emerged that students from predominantly black African universities and communities envisaged a future in which they would use their L1 in the workplace (Parkinson and Crouch, 2011). Ngcobo's (2014) study on language identity in a South African higher education institution equally notes a strong correlation between the educational background and attitudes towards the role of L1 both in education and the workplace. These findings are also echoed by Street (2003, 2011) who argues that ideology in literacy is influenced by educational context.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding the findings of the current study on participants' reflections on their experience with a translanguaging approach we point out the findings' pedagogical implications and link them with issues of promoting language equality in education and society. The overall findings indicate positive reflections on the benefits of the translanguaging approach. These benefits are indicated as the opportunity to transfer knowledge and skills, not only from L1 to L2 but bi-directionally between two used languages. Knowledge of different languages provides support in shuttling across language activities. In this manner, a task that involves summarising a text in two different languages requires the students to tap into their basic translation and interpretation skills. For success in this area they should possess a rich vocabulary and some basic translation skills. In cases where they struggle with vocabulary, the tasks require them to seek additional information from other learning resources and students around them. In this manner, the support provides the ESL students with a more equal opportunity to learn and succeed in education.

The translanguaging approach contributes to both independent and collaborative vocabulary development. This has positive implications for learning that should not be ignored. Particularly in a postsecondary environment students should be encouraged to learn to study both independently and in collaboration with their contemporaries. This teaches them the importance of serving their community rather than being solely individualistic. Their participation can contribute to a transformative pedagogy among themselves, as mentioned earlier.

It is, however, acknowledged that there were voices that expressed discontent with the translanguaging approach. As noted in previous studies, bilingual education contributes to positive attitudes and development of skills across different languages elsewhere and in South

Africa (Lee, 2006; Rudwick 2006). This implies a need to extend biliteracy and translanguaging in South African schools and at tertiary institutions.

The value of translanguaging in preparing the future workforce so that it can efficiently and equally serve members of a multilingual society was strongly supported in this study and in previous studies. This implies a need to point out this crucial benefit in instances where there is some doubt as to the benefits of a biliteracy approach. Educators could go as far as bringing to class examples of authentic documents produced in the workplace to make students see the relevance of bi/multilingual education. These could also include communiques circulated to staff members to ensure equity when distributing information.

### **Acknowledgement**

The paper is part of the project initially developed by Sandiso Ngcobo during his participation in the Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) fellowship programme sponsored by the Department of Higher Education and Training, which he later extended to include departmental members.

### **References**

- Bangeni, B. & Kapp, R. 2007. Shifting language attitudes in a linguistically diverse learning environment in South Africa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 28(4): 253-269.
- Barton, D. 2007. *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. 2000, Literacy practices. In Barton, D., Hamilton, M., and Ivanic, R. (eds.) *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge, 7-15.
- Boakye, N. & Mbirimi, V. 2015. Multilingual pedagogy in Higher Education: Lecturers' perceptions of translanguaging in promoting academic literacy. In Makalela, L. (ed.) *New directions in language and literacy education for multilingual classrooms in Africa*. South Africa, Cape Town: CASAS, 153-174.
- Bolton, K. & Kuteeva, M. 2012. English as an academic language at a Swedish university: Parallel language use and the 'threat' of English. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(5): 429-447, DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2012.670241
- Canagarajah, A. S. 2011. Translanguaging in the classroom: Emerging issues for research and pedagogy. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 2: 1-28.
- Cervantes-Kelly, M.D. 2010. Translation and interpretation as a means to improve bilingual high school students' English and Spanish academic language proficiency. Unpublished PhD diss., University of Arizona, United States.
- CHE. 2013. A Proposal for Undergraduate Curriculum Reform in South Africa: The Case for a Flexible Curriculum Structure'. Report of the Task Team on Undergraduate Curriculum Structure. Council on Higher Education: Pretoria.
- Childs, M. 2016. Reflecting on translanguaging in multilingual classrooms: Harnessing the power of poetry and photography. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 5(1): 22-40.
- Choy, S.C. & Lee, M.Y. 2012. Effects of teaching paraphrasing skills to students learning summary writing in ESL. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 8(2): 77-89.

- Cummins, J. 1979. Linguistic Interdependence and the Educational Development of Bilingual Children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(2): 222-251
- Cummins, J. 2008. Teaching for transfer: Challenging the two solitudes assumption in bilingual education. In Cummins, J. & Hornberger, N.H. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education*, 2nd Ed., Vol. 5: Bilingual education. New York: Springer Science/Business Media LLC, 65–75.
- Dehkordi, M.R. & Shafiee, S. 2016. The effect of triple blank filling and summary writing exercises on learning L2 vocabulary meaning, form and use. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 3(5): 69-82.
- Department of Basic Education (DoE). 2014. Ministerial Task Team on the National Senior Certificate. Online at:  
<http://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=VIFw9JGiNNo%3D&tabid>. (accessed 3 May 2016).
- Department of Education (DoE). 1997. Language in Education Policy. Pretoria: Department of Education. Online at:  
[http://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=XpJ7gz4rPT0%](http://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=XpJ7gz4rPT0%3D&tabid) (accessed 3 May 2016).
- Department of Education (DoE). 2002. Language Policy for Higher Education. Pretoria: Department of Education. Online at:  
<http://www.dhet.gov.za/.../Language%20Policy%20for%20Higher%20Education.pdf> (accessed 3 May 2016).
- Ellis, R. R. 2012. *Language teaching research and language pedagogy*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- García, O. & Leiva, C. 2014. Theorizing and Enacting Translanguaging for Social Justice. In Blackledge, A. and Creese, A. (eds.) *Heteroglossia as Practice and Pedagogy*. Volume 20 of the series Educational Linguistics. Netherlands: Springer, 199-216.
- García, O. & Wei, L. 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan Pivot.
- García, O. 2009. *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Malden, MA and Oxford, United Kingdom: Wiley/Blackwell.
- Gentil, G. 2010. A biliteracy agenda for genre research, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 20: 6-23.
- Grosjean, F. 2016. What is Translanguaging? Online at:  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-bilingual/201603/what-is-translanguaging> (accessed 8 July 2016).
- Gumbi, P. 2014. Ubuliminingi esiFundazweni saseFreyistata: Okwenzeka ezindlini zokufundela eNyuvesiti yaseFreyistata, *Alternation Special Edition*, 13: 173-190.
- Hornberger, N.H. & Link, H. 2012. Translanguaging in today's classrooms: A biliteracy lens. *Theory into Practice*, 51(4): 239-247.
- Idris, N., Baba, S. & Abdullah, R. 2011. Identifying students' summary writing strategies using summary sentence decomposition algorithm. *Malaysian Journal of Computer Science*, 24(4): 180-194.
- Kumar, R. 2012. *Research methodology: a step-by-step guide for beginners*. New Delhi: SAGE.

- Lee, S.K. 2006. The Latino students' attitudes, perceptions, and views on bilingual education. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 30(1): 107-121.
- Letseka, M. & Maile, S. 2008. High university drop-out rates: A threat to South Africa's future. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Policy Brief, March 2008. Online at: [www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/3330/2008marDropout%20rates.pdf](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/3330/2008marDropout%20rates.pdf) (accessed 14 August 2014).
- Lewis, G., Jones, B. & Baker, C. 2012. Translanguaging: origins and development from school to street and beyond. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 18(7): 641-654. DOI: 10.1080/13803611.2012.718488.
- Makaleka, L. 2016. Bilingualism in South Africa: Reconnecting with Ubuntu translanguaging. In Garcia, O. and Lin, A. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of bilingualism and bilingual education*. New York: Springer Science/Business Media LLC, 1-13.
- Mashiya, N. 2014. Tertiary educators' reflections on language practices that enhance student learning and promote multilingualism. In Hibbert, L. and van der Walt, C. (eds.) *Multilingual universities in South Africa: Reflecting society in higher education*. United Kingdom, Multilingual Matters, 145-163.
- Mazak, C.M. 2016. Introduction: Theorising translanguaging practices in higher education. In Mazak, C.M. and Carroll, K.S. (eds.) *Translanguaging in higher education: Beyond monolingual ideologies*. United Kingdom, Multilingual Matters, 1-10. Online at: <https://www.uprm.edu/english/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/TLinHigherEd-TOCIntro.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2016).
- Mkhize, N. & Ndimande-Hlongwa, N. 2014. African Languages, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and the Transformation of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Higher Education, *Alternation*, 21(2):10-37.
- Mothibeli, A. 2005. Cross-country achievement results from the SACMEQ 11 Project – 2000 to 2002: A quantitative analysis of education systems in Southern and Eastern Africa, *Edusource Data News*, 49 (October). Johannesburg: the Education Foundation Trust.
- Mwinda, N. & van der Walt, C. 2015. From 'English-only' to translanguaging strategies : exploring possibilities. *Per Linguam: a Journal of Language Learning*, 31(3): 100-118, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5785/31-3-620>.
- Ngcobo, S. 2014. The struggle to maintain identity in higher education among Zulu-speaking students. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 17(6): 695-713, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.953776>.
- Otheguy, R., García, O. & Reid, W. 2015. Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6(3): 281-307.
- Parkinson, J. & Crouch, A. 2011. Education, language, and identity amongst students at a South African university. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 10(2): 83-98.
- Parmegiani, A. & Rudwick, S. 2014. IsiZulu-English bilingualisation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: An exploration of students' attitudes. In Hibbert, L and van der Walt, C. (eds.), *Multilingual universities in South Africa: Reflecting society in higher education*. United Kingdom, Multilingual Matters, 107-122.
- Paxton, M. 2009. It's easy to learn when you using your home language but with English you need to start learning language before you get to the concept: Bilingual concept

- development in an English medium university in South Africa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30(4): 345-359.
- Paxton, M. 2012. Student voice as a methodological issue in academic literacies research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(3): 381-391. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.634382>.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1996. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Online at: <http://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/constitution-republic-south-Africa-1996-1> (accessed 13 March 2015).
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). 1997. Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, *Government Gazette No. 18515*. Online at: <http://www.gov.za/documents/higher-education-act> (accessed 16 April 2016).
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). 2011. South African Languages Bill, *Government Gazette No. 34675*. Online at: <http://www.sacr.gpg.gov.za/legislation/Bills/SA%20Languages%20Bill.pdf> (accessed 16 April 2016)
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). 2012. Use of Official Languages Act No. 12 of 2012, *Government Gazette No. 35742*. Online at: [https://www.westerncape.gov.za/assets/...affairs.../use\\_of\\_official\\_languages\\_act\\_1.pdf](https://www.westerncape.gov.za/assets/...affairs.../use_of_official_languages_act_1.pdf) (accessed 21 May 2016).
- Rudwick, S. 2006. Language, identity and ethnicity in post-Apartheid South Africa: the case of the isiZulu community. Unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
- SAPA. 2008. University dropouts increase. Online at: <http://news.iafrica.com/sa/917608.htm> (Accessed 8 August 2015).
- Scott, I. 2012. Access, Success and Curriculum: Aspects of their organic relationship. In Dhunpath, R. and Vithal, R. (eds.) *Alternative Access to Higher Education: Underprepared Students or Underprepared Institutions?* Pinelands, South Africa: Pearson Education Limited, 26-50.
- Statistics South. 2012. Census 2011 Statistical release (Revised). Pretoria: South Africa.
- Street, B. 2003. What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice, *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5(2): 77-91.
- Street, B. 2011. New Literacy Studies and the Continua of Biliteracy. In Hult, F. and King, K. (eds.) *Educational linguistics in practice: Applying the local globally and the global locally*, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters, 59-67.
- Velasco, P. & García, O. 2014. Translanguaging and the writing of bilingual learners. *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, (37)1: 6-23.
- Visedo, E. 2013. From Limited-English-Proficient to Educator: Perspectives on Three Spanish-English Biliteracy Journeys. Unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of South Florida, United States.
- Webb, V. 2013. African languages in post-1994 education in South Africa: Our own Titanic? *South African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 31(2): 173-184.
- Welman, C., Kruger, F. & Mitchell, B. 2005. *Research methodology*. 3rd Ed. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.



This publication is covered by a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. For further information please see: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.