

DOI: 10.24412/2470-1262-2022-3 -70-77

YDK(UDC) 81-2

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*For citation: Erasmus Charamba, (2022).  
Discontinuous Continuities: Translanguaging as a Culturally  
Responsive Multilingual Pedagogy for Epistemic Access.  
Cross-Cultural Studies: Education and Science,  
Vol. 7, Issue 3 (2022), pp. 70-77 (in USA)*

*Manuscript received: 18/08/2022*

*Accepted for publication: 20 /11/2022*

*The author has read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **DISCONTINUOUS CONTINUITIES: TRANSLANGUAGING AS A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE MULTILINGUAL PEDAGOGY FOR EPISTEMIC ACCESS**

### **Abstract:**

The extent of student underachievement in sub-Saharan Africa is confirmed by international student assessments such as The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). TIMSS measures trends in mathematics and science achievement at fourth and eighth grades while PIRLS is a comprehensive assessment of fourth grade students' reading literacy achievement.

TIMSS 2015 data on Grade 8 students shows that in the participating sub-Saharan African countries (Botswana, Ghana, South Africa), between 68% and about 90% of students failed to reach the low benchmark in mathematics and science. PIRLS 2016 data suggests 78% of South African students could not read for comprehension. Among the factors that were identified to explain the poor learning achievement in the region are, poor mastery of the curriculum, rigid teaching practices, lack of textbooks and, most importantly, teaching materials in a language not well understood by the students, as well as low proficiency in the language of instruction (vital for effective learning).

This article explores the pivotal role translanguaging plays in epistemic access, recommending teachers to view students' linguistic repertoire as a teaching/learning resource and not a hindrance.

**Keywords:** decolonisation; epistemic access; literacy; monolingualism; multilingualism; translanguaging

### **Introduction**

For over 40 years now, UNESCO has been celebrating International Literacy Day by reminding the international community that literacy is a human right and the foundation of all learning. In the year 2017, International Literacy Day was celebrated across the globe under the

theme of 'Literacy in a digital world'. For statistical purposes, UNESCO defines a literate person as someone who can read and write a short simple statement about their life. In recognizing its impact on poverty, health, active citizenship and empowerment, the development community recognizes that "illiteracy is a condition that denies people opportunity" [1]. Literacy, besides being a fundamental human right, is a foundation for reaching the overarching goal of reducing human poverty

In addition to being a right in itself, literacy allows the pursuit of other human rights. It confers a wide set of benefits and strengthens the capabilities of individuals, families, and communities to access health, educational, economic, political and cultural opportunities. Although literacy has been high on the development agenda over the past decades, UNESCO Institute for Statistics data show that 750 million adults – two-thirds of whom are women – still lack basic reading and writing skills. 102 million of the illiterate population were between 15 and 24 years old [1]. The global adult literacy rate was 86% in 2016, while the youth literacy rate was 91%. Comparatively the literacy rate for sub-Saharan Africa rose from 52% to 65% between 1990 and 2016 [1].

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, the majority of countries missed the Education for All (EFA) goal of reducing adult illiteracy rates by 50% between the years 2000 and 2015. At the global level, the adult and youth literacy rates are estimated to have grown by only 4% each over this period. In addition, over 27% of all illiterate adults live in sub-Saharan Africa where 72% of adult males are literate and 57% female. Formal schooling is a driving force for literacy expansion, provided that children who have access to it complete school and receive an education of good quality. Yet, in half of the sub-Saharan African countries, of a cohort of pupils who enroll in primary education, less than 60% reach the last grade. The survival rate varies from 22% in Malawi to nearly 98% in Mauritius [2]. Even among those who reach the last grade, large numbers possess weak literacy and numeracy skills [3].

Results from the second round of the 2012 SACMEQ study, conducted in thirteen southern Africa countries and one territory, showed that hardly any Grade 6 students in Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia reached one of the highest four levels of the numeracy scale, while more than one-third did so in Kenya, Mauritius, and Seychelles. The Education For All [2] report goes on to suggest that the extent of underachievement is confirmed by other international student assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). TIMSS 2015 data on Grade 8 students show that in the participating sub-Saharan African countries (Botswana, Ghana, South Africa), between 68% and about 90% of students failed to reach the low benchmark in mathematics.

Among the factors that may explain the poor learning achievements in the region, as the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 points out, is poor mastery of the curriculum, rigid teaching practices, lack of textbooks and other teaching materials, as well as insufficient instructional time (vital for better learning), and chiefly lack of appropriate language, book, media and information policies to develop environments in which literacy can flourish and be valued [3]. The presence of printed and visual materials in households, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and the community in languages understood by all encourages individuals to become literate and to integrate their literacy skills into their everyday lives.

The link between poverty and illiteracy is also observed at the household level. In six sub-Saharan African countries with particularly low overall literacy rates (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo), the literacy gap between the poorest and wealthiest households is more than forty percentage points [2]. Sub-Saharan Africa urgently needs an education paradigm shift where education planners have to look beyond counting the number of children sitting in classrooms and start to focus on learning, paying special attention to overhauling teacher recruitment, training and support systems, and embracing linguistic and cultural diversity in order to deliver effective classroom instruction [4]. Lessons learned over recent decades show that meeting the goal of universal literacy calls not only for more effective efforts but also for renewed

political will and for doing things differently at all levels - locally, nationally and internationally. This undoubtedly includes embracing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom [1].

### **Language and Education in Pre-colonial sub- Saharan Africa**

Literacy and education are among the most necessary ingredients for human development in today's knowledge world or as Nelson Mandela [5] puts it, "education is the most powerful weapon, which we can use to change the world". In order for one to comprehend how those two (literacy and education) have evolved and their contemporary state in the sub- Saharan Africa, it is important to understand the countries' colonial and post-colonial history since it contributes to the countries' institutional policies and foundation.

Like in any region, literacy in sub- Saharan Africa is defined according to the [1] definition that regards literacy as the ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement related to one's daily life. Literacy, therefore, involves a continuum of the reading and writing skills and usually encompasses basic numeracy. Formal education in sub- Saharan Africa is said to have been introduced in the seventeenth century following the arrival of the clergy as it was mainly part of their missionary work and advancing colonial interests in the region. The content of the colonial education was usually Western-oriented and generally given to a few selected individuals, to support the colonial administrations [6]. All educational activities were delivered in the colonial master's language.

Consequently, in all the British colonies in Southern Africa English became the sole official language much as was Portuguese in former Portuguese colonies [6]. This led to sidelining of indigenous languages, relegating them to play no role at all in the classroom after the third grade, and their non-use in the governance of the colonial states. When these British and Portuguese colonies eventually gained political independence, English and Portuguese retained their status as either the sole official language (for example in Malawi, Botswana, and Zimbabwe); or co-official language (for example in Lesotho, South Africa, and Swaziland).

Therefore, socio-functionally the relationship between English and Portuguese and the African languages can rightly be described as diglossic, with the former as the H (igh) languages, and the latter as the L (ow) languages [6]. This created a small number of elites with educated people, which even after the independence during the late 1950s and early 1960s lived on, and the privileged groups used their advantages to gain political power in the newly independent African states. Colonial education and the following post-colonial era had similar goals regardless of colonial power and state ideology [7].

### **Language and Education in Post- colonial sub- Saharan Africa**

Present-day sub- Saharan Africa is denoted by a myriad of language policies and attitudes concerning its indigenous languages. This, as described earlier, emanates from its history of colonisation. At independence, each country in the region had to decide what language or languages it would use for its nationalistic needs. Sadly, maybe due to instilled language ideologies by the colonial powers, no country in the region chose any of its indigenous languages as a national language. The countries went for their colonial masters' languages and accorded them official or national language status.

The chosen languages became the respective countries' *lingua franca* and the languages of instruction in the respective countries' institutions of education. Countries in the region still follow colonial practices where children's home languages are used in the first two or three grades of primary school education [3]. From grade four onwards and except during the few periods allotted to African languages on the official school timetable, all learners are expected to converse among themselves as well as with their teachers only in the language of instruction. The former colonisers' language then becomes the language of instruction right up to tertiary. Most schools go to the extent of punishing learners who speak a language other than the language of instruction during schooling hours. While colonialism lasted, no African languages were ever taught in school, let alone being used as languages of instruction in respective countries [8]. This monoglossic practice is still

perpetuated in independent sub-Saharan Africa resulting in placing exotic languages on a pinnacle at the expense of indigenous languages. Indigenous languages, or vernacular as they came to be known during the colonial era, were and continue to be considered unfit for use as languages of instruction further than the third or fourth grade resulting in the region having the lowest literacy rates in the world [7].

Colonial ideologies and practices, undoubtedly led to a systematic exclusion of African languages in places of high esteem such as schools, trade, work, and religious gatherings under the pretext of ‘one nation – one language’, ‘one classroom – one language’—a practice that still dominates national and regional dialogues and classroom practices today. In cases where the colonial language is not the exclusive official language, it was accorded a “co-official language” status. Notable examples are with Swati and Sesotho in Swaziland and Lesotho, respectively, much as it is in South Africa [6].

### **Translanguaging as a Multilingual Pedagogy in the Classroom**

To quote the late Nelson Mandela, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart” [5]. With regard to multilingual education, [9]: emphasised the importance of both the global and the national educational institutions to consider and implement it and proclaiming that:

*“the requirements of global and national participation, and the specific needs of particular, culturally and linguistically distinct communities can only be addressed by multilingual education. In regions where the language of the learner is not the official or national language of the country, bilingual and multilingual education can make mother-tongue instruction possible while providing at the same time the acquisition of languages and concepts used in the world”.*

Even though multilinguals across the globe have been using multiple languages simultaneously since time immemorial, as a focus of research this concept emerged in the 1980s when Cen Williams and his colleagues were investigating effective pedagogical strategies for students to use more than one language in the same lesson for effective education. Cen Williams coined the term ‘trawsieithu’ [10] to describe the process in which students would read or hear in one language and then write or discuss what they would have read or heard in another. The term ‘trawsieithu’ was then translated into the English as ‘translanguaging’ see [11] marking a paradigm shift, moving away from traditional linguistic terms such as code-switching, and code-mixing, calling into question the existence of ‘languages’ as identifiable, distinct systems [12].

In defining translanguaging, [13] uses a sports analogy on hurdles, where two athletic skills, high jump and sprinting are involved. Athletes use these skills as an integrated whole to excel in their sport just in the same way multilinguals use their linguistic skills to communicate effectively. Translanguaging is when a person who knows more than one language freely uses all those languages to ask or answer questions, understand spoken or written text, learn concepts, explain phenomena, and communicate coherently in any social setting. [14] defines translanguaging as being a relatively new term for an age-old practice – that of switching between the languages one knows in order to maximise communicative potential.

In a way, this phenomenon can be viewed as flexible multilingualism, whether it involves combining elements from different languages in the same utterance (codeswitching) or alternating between languages in different parts of a task. Translanguaging can, therefore, be considered to be a natural means of using one’s linguistic resources to their greatest effect. Translanguaging as a structured metacognitive language process enables epistemological access [11] and the crafting of sociocultural identities [15]. From this perspective, language is no longer a bounded, self-contained entity, embedded in static communicative activities, but rather a mobile resource working together with multimodal and multisensory signs to construct meaning [16].

Translanguaging in education can be defined as a process by which students engage in complex discursive practices that include all their language practices in order to develop new language practices and sustain old ones, communicate and appropriate knowledge, and give voice to

new socio-political realities by interrogating linguistic inequality [17]. A continuum of practice is highly possible in translanguaging work including oral to written, receptive to expressive, and encouraging the movement of understandings of one language to inform understandings of another [18].

In educational contexts, this can mean that minority students are not only allowed but also encouraged to use their multiple languages in academic activities. This does not necessarily require the subject teacher to be knowledgeable of all the students' home languages, instead, the students can use their languages when speaking between themselves, or to find information on various topics, for examples in the form of videos or texts [19]. The outputs, such as reports, write-ups, and presentations can still be produced in the school's language of instruction, knowledgeable to the teacher unless all students and the teacher fully comprehend the particular student's mother tongue [15].

Translanguaging in the classroom, unquestionably addresses and redresses the "melting pot" theory of past years which resulted in the near-death of local languages [20] while at the same time affording learners a chance to learn in their mother tongue or preferred language, other than the colonial master's language. Translanguaging also makes it easier for parents to assist their children with homework. For instance, the child can explain the task to the parent in either their home language or the language of instruction. They can then together discuss the task and find out relevant information in their home language. Finally, the child will then complete the task in the language of instruction.

The educational and social benefits derived from translanguaging as highlighted by [21]; [17]; [15] and [14] to name but a few researchers, can be summed up as:

- Promotes a deeper and fuller understanding of the concepts learned
- Helps the development and sustainability of minority languages
- Facilitates home-school links and cooperation
- Promotes identity affirmation
- Boosts morale and confidence
- Users feel appreciated and included in activities.
- validates multilingualism, viewing it as a valuable asset rather than a problem or a temporary transitional interactional tool in early schooling
- represents more efficient and effective teaching and learning technique than is possible in one language only
- offers opportunities for individuals to develop rich and varied communicative repertoires for use within and outside school.

Translanguaging can, therefore, be successfully used as a pedagogically sensitive mechanism to promote learning [21]. Both languages (home language and language of instruction), are used in an organised manner to mediate understanding and learning [22] thereby enabling a deeper and complete understanding of concepts learned [23]. Looking at the definition by [15], the scholars suggest the emancipatory nature of this practice and its facility to disrupt the power imbalances of languages brought about by the colonial regime leading to fruitful academic practices as it (translanguaging) enables certain concepts to be reinforced through repetition (in several languages) and clarified in much more detail as opposed to monoglossic ideologies.

The most valuable resource sub-Saharan Africa has are its children with diverse cultural and linguistic affiliations. These should therefore, be given all the support they need to thrive in life through an enormous paradigm shift. Language is both a means and an end in educational systems. As a means to learning, it manifests itself in countless, shifting modalities; while as an end or objective of learning, it is often perceived as an autonomous, formal entity. It is unfortunate to note that in most schools in sub-Saharan Africa learners are discouraged from using any other language than the language of instruction. The rigid restrictions are often based on the (false) presumption

that students learn best (especially languages) when there is no interference from other languages [19]. It is time for the region to make the marginalised visible.

When the language, culture, and history of an individual are not acknowledged in the school context, this experience can be dehumanising. In this regard, [24] maintains that a humanising pedagogy can be enacted by taking into account the contexts, background, and world views of learners. Mother Tongue Comfort reminds of the delight of being able to use the home language: “I am truly me when wrapped in my words and my ideas” [17]. [25] add that both learners and teachers benefit from the acknowledgement of who they are and what they are able to do. As pointed out elsewhere in this chapter, most learners in sub-Saharan Africa use their mother tongue in the early years of schooling, which enables them to negotiate language and conceptual competences with relative ease. The switch in the third grade to learning and teaching in another language snatches the blanket of the familiar language away [17]. Translanguaging could provide a means of extending the use of the mother tongue or main language purposefully and systematically into the higher academic phases. The mother tongue can thus be used as a bridge to the required school’s language of instruction. The goal would thus be one of bi/multilingualism rather than foregrounding competence in the language of instruction.

### **Further Research directions**

Sub-Saharan Africa is a multilingual and multicultural region that has a multilingual citizenry. The region exists through its various languages; it is through indigenous languages we express ourselves, communicate, and transmit traditional knowledge, and cultures, and should thus educate our children in a sustainable way which brings into focus experienced collective decipherability and views classrooms as miniatures of social cohesion. Both the teacher and the student are able to experience being more fully human when their language, culture, and history are recognised, welcomed, and used in the school classroom.

Very little, if any, attention has been paid to the critical role African languages play in the learning environment across the curriculum and to the efforts by educational institutions to prepare and produce linguistically responsive teachers to teach and assess the growing number of multilingual sub-Saharan African students through multilingual pedagogies. Translanguaging as a multilingual pedagogy makes use of students’ linguistic repertoire thereby enhancing a deep comprehension of academic knowledge learned. This pedagogical approach can also be extended to include bi/multilingual assessments. Consequently, further and more extensive research is therefore called for to explore the efficacy of translanguaging as a multilingual pedagogy in the sub-Saharan context.

### **Conclusion**

This article began by exploring the emergence of monolingualism in the linguistically and culturally diverse sub-Saharan African region. It also examined different ideological stances enacted towards multilingualism and translanguaging and analyses ways in which these ideologies impact educational systems in the region, and advocates for heteroglossia, inclusive approaches to school curricula. Several authors [21]; [23]; [15]; [26] promoted translanguaging as systematic and pedagogically sound means of connecting the language of instruction and the languages of learners. Translanguaging is a practice used by multilingual individuals to move between the languages that they know in order to communicate in a range of social contexts [17].

The students’ linguistic repertoire is understood as one system, rather than as a collection of discrete languages. In instances where students are permitted and/or encouraged to use insights gained from one language to help them use another language, as in the case of translanguaging, this can be an affirming experience and may facilitate more effective learning resulting in higher academic performance [3]. I further argue that translanguaging can be effectively used as a pedagogical tool in multilingual classrooms to bridge communication in nuanced ways and bring about a more upright and humanising experience for students, parents, and teachers.

As [27] correctly points out, when the “treasures” of language and culture are forced to remain outside the classroom door, this can result in a sense of humiliation at the rejection of vital aspects of being human. Translanguaging as a multilingual tool can promote being more fully present in interpersonal engagement. Yet, enacting emancipatory language practices in school classrooms is not without complications. Translanguaging in the global south has, therefore, ceased to be a choice but a necessity.

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