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Translanguaging: A tool to decolonise students' experiences of learning to write for academic purposes in the South African university context

ABSTRACT

University students can experience many challenges writing for academic purposes as they move from secondary to post-secondary studies. Both first and additional language users of English experience these challenges, resulting in universities across the globe instituting different modalities to help ease students' transitions. In South African universities, despite English being the medium of instruction, most students are additional language speakers of English. This article discusses findings from a 2019 study that investigated three questions: 1) Do first-year, additional language users of English choose to engage in translanguaging when presented with such an opportunity in their university courses? 2) If they choose to use this tool, how do they employ the genre conventions and discourse markers of the traditional academic essay? 3) What are their reactions to being presented with the opportunity to use translanguaging in their academic studies? The findings illustrate that approximately half of the study's participants chose to employ translanguaging in their responses and were able to successfully use the genre conventions and discourse makers of the academic essay.

Keywords: writing for academic purposes; biliteracy; epistemic injustice; linguistic resources; translanguaging

1.   Introduction

Globally, much has been written about the challenges university students can experience in learning how to write for their disciplines of study when they enter post-secondary studies (Bazerman, 2008; Clarence & Dison, 2017). Their challenges stem from the transition they experience as they move from secondary school to the university context—a context that requires them to use new ways to acquire, interpret, organise and structure knowledge (Carstens, 2012). A typical genre that post-secondary students can be expected to learn and employ in their university courses is the traditional academic essay. Celce-Murcia (2001) has explained that this is a genre with which even native speakers of English struggle. Thus, if first language English speakers struggle with such a task, it can be assumed that students who are additional language speakers of English (EAL) could experience even greater challenges with this task. In many sub-Saharan African countries, this situation is further exacerbated by English being the de-facto language of teaching and learning in higher education, despite multilingualism being the norm and not the exception in many countries (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Hornberger, 2003). In the context of South Africa, the location for this study, Banda (2007) has painted a dismal picture of the academic writing preparedness of South African university students. To address such challenges, universities in South Africa, such as the one at which this study was conducted, have introduced various interventions to develop the academic literacies of their students with much focus given to developing the literacies of Black African students, many of whom are first language speakers of Indigenous[1] South African languages.

Interestingly, within the context of these interventions, few researchers have attended to how these students' diverse linguistic repertoires can be a resource rather than a challenge when learning how to write for their disciplines of study. The resource offered by one's home language is often overlooked, despite additional language research illustrating that students can use their strongest language to increase their literacy performance and advance their literacy skills in the other language, which in the South African education system, is often English (see Cummins, 2000; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015; Hornberger, 2004; Reyes, 2006). This lack of appreciation of the role Indigenous South African languages can play in helping additional language speakers of English learn their disciplinary discourses in the higher education context can potentially be interpreted as a reproduction of colonial discourses (Hurst, 2016). Failing to draw on learners' home language in learning the discourse of academia can deny many learners the opportunity to use their first language to gain access to and succeed in higher education (Mwaniki, 2012) and is a denial of Indigenous epistemic frameworks (Kumalo, 2018). Whitelaw, Filby and Dowling (2019: 75) have argued that universities, by engaging in this practice,

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1   Although some style guides do not recommend capitalizing the word "Indigenous", we have intentionally chosen to capitalize the term, as per many other decolonization researchers studying issues of language in the South African context (e.g., Joseph & Ramani, 2012) and internationally (e.g., McIvor & Ball, 2019) to give value to people and languages that have historically been devalued for hundreds of years due to the horrific atrocities of colonialism and apartheid.

marginalise African languages, thus alienating students, leaving them to "feel let down by the very education system that ought to be navigating them out of the[ir] country's persistent inequality". In global contexts, where English dominates the education system as a de-facto language of teaching and learning, students for whom English is not a first language may be denied and deprived of the opportunity to meaningfully participate and succeed in their learning processes.

The failure to use African languages for teaching and learning is a form of epistemic violence (Heleta, 2016). To address this violence, it is imperative that African institutions of higher learning, particularly those entities trying to help students become literate for their disciplines of study, appreciate and embrace their country's multilingual reality. This shift in focus requires universities to provide students with educational opportunities that draw on their strongest languages to support them to study in the medium of English (Carstens, 2015). Such a mind-set calls for a paradigm shift from viewing students' first languages as a problem and placing value to language as a resource (Joseph & Ramani, 2012: 27). In addition, such an approach also allows for "a paradigm shift and enable[s] students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from different perspectives" (Cross, 2004: 404). Providing students with such opportunities would allow for inclusivity by embracing different types of knowledge and ways of creating it. Such openness would allow the South African higher education system to eliminate the pedagogic dissonance that alienates the majority of its students, who are additional language speakers of English, and instead promote their access to knowledge and quality teaching and learning (Scott, 2017).

In studying bilingualism in education throughout the world, García (2009) used the term translanguaging (hereafter referred to as TL) to refer to how bilingual and multilingual people fluidly use their linguistic resources—without regard to named language categories—to make meaning and communicate. Its original conceptual framing comes from Cen Williams in the Wales context, in which it denoted the bilingual exchange of languages of input and output with the goal of simultaneous development of both languages (Sefotho & Makalela, 2017). Thus, TL, as a pedagogical strategy, allows teachers and students to use their various linguistic repertoires in teaching and learning to eradicate language boundaries that exist in multilingual contexts and create linguistic hybridity (Sefotho & Makalela, 2017). Probyn (2015: 220) has recommended that TL be used in multilingual classrooms, as "teachers and learners frequently draw on more than one language for a range of functions; and these practices may be part of a planned bilingual curriculum or may arise fairly spontaneously in response to particular needs". In the context of South Africa, the multilingual nature of the nation has resulted in an increase in teachers and learners using TL across all levels of education (Krause & Prinsloo, 2016; Makalela, 2018; Mgijima, 2019). Yet, TL research, even globally, has typically focussed on students and teachers' informal speech interaction in the classroom rather than how TL can help students learn how to write (Canagarajah, 2011).

Recently, a few studies have been done on TL in the South African university context, but they have mainly intended to short forms of writing, such as summary writing (Ngcobo, 2018) and paraphrasing (Hungwe, 2019). Thus, there is a paucity of research investigating

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how students can potentially use TL in the classroom to develop long texts. To address this gap in the research literature, this study sought to understand if and how TL could be used by bilingual speakers of English and other Indigenous South African languages in a writing classroom at one university in South Africa to enact the genre conventions and discourse markers of the traditional academic essay (Wei, 2018)—an enactment that could potentially lead to the students gaining more success when engaging in this genre of academic writing. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions: 1) would students choose to engage in TL practices when tasked to write for academic purposes? 2) if students chose to engage in TL, would they be able to employ the genre conventions of the traditional academic essay? 3) what were the students' experiences of an academic writing assessment activity in which they could employ TL?

2.   Conceptual Framework: Translanguaging

As discussed earlier in this article, the development of TL as a conceptual framework can be traced back to the historical separation of English and Welsh (Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012a: 641). The concept then gained prominence internationally in the field of education during the early 1990s, mainly because of an inclination towards bilingualism being an advantage, rather than a disadvantage. Early studies focused on bilingualism, specifically how TL could help learners access linguistic features of two different languages in order to deal with complex cognitive processes (Lewis et al., 2012a: 641). Canagarajah (2011: 401) has defined TL as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system". This focus on moving "between languages" has led to the term being confused with an older term called code-switching (CS). To dispel the confusion, for the purposes of this study, we drew on García and Wei (2014) and Wei's (2018) distinction between the two concepts, conceptualizing CS as an action that involves the mixing or alternating between two languages or codes that occur at specific points in one communicative episode. Whereas, in contrast, we perceived TL as equal adoption of different languages, but as one unitary language with a focus on specific features of these languages for communicative purposes (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018). In this case, and for the purposes of this study, we perceived TL as an "approach to bilingualism that is centred not on languages, but on the observable communicative practices of bilinguals" (García, Flores, & Chu, 2011: 5). Thus, TL is not about the use of separate languages in education, but "the flexible and meaningful actions through which bilinguals select features in their linguistic repertoire in order to communicate appropriately" (Velasco & García, 2014: 7). Our conceptualization of TL for this study and more generally is rooted in educational contexts where it is believed to provide students with an opportunity to flexibly engage in pedagogical practices that are meant to enable them to understand and interpret their experiences (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012b).

When bilingual and multilingual individuals adopt TL, they select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and negotiate particular communicative contexts (Vogel & García, 2017). A small-scale example of TL may 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 only the language that is the medium of instruction (García & Wei, 2014). A large-scale example could be of students communicating gained knowledge and developed literacy using two languages in speech or writing (Baker, 2011; García & Kano, 2014; Cenoz, 2017; Wei, 2018). As mentioned above, this article focuses on how EAL students communicate gained knowledge and developed literacy as they engaged in the genre of essay writing. In analysing a translanguaging event, the teacher or researcher focuses on how bilinguals have employed different linguistic, cognitive, social and semiotic resources to develop a meaningful piece of writing (Wei, 2018). Such analysis allows for the assessment of unique ways in which students use their bilingualism, as well as their biliteracy and multiliteracy skills across two languages (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2016; Bauer & Colomer, 2016).

3.   Translanguaging writing patterns

TL can take different patterns and literacy forms as bilingual and multilingual individuals exploit their linguistic repertoires. With regard to patterns, Nagy (2018: 45) makes a distinction between one-way and two-way translanguaging which corresponds with dependent and independent translanguaging. One-way and dependent TL occurs when the learner solely depends on linguistic skills from one language (typically their first language) to communicate information gained in a second language. Two-way and independent TL occurs when a learner flexibly alternates between two languages in displaying and communicating their understanding of knowledge (Nagy, 2018). Whatever pattern is adopted, TL can be viewed as a social justice tool, providing students with alternatives they can explore to free themselves from the limiting monolingual ways of knowing in an additional language education environment. In contexts where students must communicate in writing, TL allows them the opportunity to think creatively and use language effectively (Velasco & García, 2014). Evidently, both TL patterns are strategic forms of language use that are deliberately selected in order to effectively allow an individual to communicate their understanding of the text and the task at hand.

The above discussion illustrates that translanguaging is clearly not about only using different languages in educational contexts. Instead, it is about language being used effectively wherein effectiveness is defined by a student's ability to use appropriate academic conventions to access and successfully communicate their knowledge to their reader. To achieve this goal in the post-secondary context, EAL students need to develop literacy skills across their different languages to write for academic purposes in English.

4.   Conventions of the academic essay genre

The fundamental literacy skills associated with essay writing across all languages and levels of education is the ability to construct an argument and present ideas that support this argument in a structured way that an outside reader can follow. Toba, Noor and Sanu (2019) have asserted that for an essay to meet the expectations of its intended reader, it needs to contain the following genre conventions:

- An introductory paragraph that provides background information on the topic; an argument that seeks to address a limitation related to the topic; and a roadmap that informs the reader about the essay's organisation.

- A body that is constructed of several paragraphs, beginning with a topic sentence, and followed by supporting sentences that use evidence to support the overarching argument, and end with a concluding sentence.

- A conclusion that summarises the essay, connects back to the introductory paragraph, and leaves the reader with some valuable points to consider about the essay's topic.

The paragraphs and sentences that constitute the three genre conventions described above (and also construct the overarching genre of the academic essay) need to follow a particular linguistic strategy in their presentation. In this case, Al-khazraji (2019) identifies the use of discourse markers as an effective linguistic strategy used to create coherent discourse to enable learners to effectively engage in the genre of the academic essay. Discourse markers are groups of signals that add coherence and cohesion to the text to provide fluency and unity in written communication by showing how different sections of a text, paragraphs, and sentences relate to another (Al-khazraji, 2019; Martinez, 2004; Zhao, 2013). Baldwin (2014) has emphasised that the use of various types of discourse markers requires a strong knowledge of vocabulary (lexical) and grammar since each expresses a different meaning. In this case, Halliday and Hasan (1976) first described a written text as a semantic unit of language—which is a unit of meaningful words. To develop a meaningful text, one must possess the ability to make suitable vocabulary choices, which are words and phrases put together in ways that illustrate a relationship between them. Vocabulary also constitutes words that are actually used to communicate the target knowledge (Nomlomo & Katiya, 2018). The second type of knowledge needed, as stated above, to employ effective discourse markers is grammar, and more specifically grammatical cohesion, which can be classified into four categories:

- Reference: the situation in which one element cannot be semantically interpreted unless it refers to another element in the text using pronouns, articles, demonstratives and comparatives.

- Substitution: an item that is replaced by another item in the text to avoid repetition.

- Ellipsis: the process of omitting an item mentioned earlier in a text.

- Conjunction: words that serve as linking devices between sentences or clauses in a text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

Failure to use discourse markers correctly can distort written or spoken communication regardless of language of use. To this end, writing for academic purpose is not only about conforming to and using a set of conventions, but also conforming to literacy, cultural and social practices that involve the use of a variety of cognitive abilities (Street 2004) which the L1 of a learner can play a significant role in developing. Having outlined this study's theoretical framework, the following section describes the study's research context, the methodological approach, methods and tools of analysis.

5. Research Context

This study was based at a university of technology (UoT) located in a South African township that was previously designated by the country's former apartheid government for Black *isi*Zulu-speaking South Africans. This historical context has been instrumental in having this UoT remain mainly *isi*Zulu-speaking, despite English being the medium of instruction. The home and school backgrounds of the students tend to be rural and township, which can result in many not having frequent and fluent exposure to English. In order to pass their final year of schooling, known in South Africa as matric, students at this institution need to pass at least two languages. The student population of this UoT is therefore comprised of either bilingual or multilingual adults who have differing levels of proficiency in the English, this institution's medium of instruction. This study's principal investigator (PI) is a bilingual speaker of English and *isi*Zulu, who teaches a first-year English communication course at this institution. A major focus of this course is to help students become proficient users of the discourse and knowledge conventions of their various disciplines of study.

6. Methodology

This qualitative study sought to answer the following research questions: 1) would students choose to engage in TL practices when tasked to write for academic purposes? 2) if they chose to engage in TL, would they be able to employ the genre conventions of the traditional academic essay? 3) what were the students' experiences of an academic writing assessment activity in which they could employ TL? To answer these research questions, we collected all students' essays, which were written in *isi*Zulu only, a combination of *isi*Zulu and English, or English only. These essays were a final product produced during a formal test that was undertaken under time constraints. Prior to the test, no intervention had been conducted with the students introducing them to TL. The essays were based on two topics related to a prescribed autobiography written in English with limited use of *isi*Zulu and isiXhosa. The prescribed book, written by Trevor Noah, was entitled *Born a crime: Stories from South African childhood.* The instructions and

questions for these essays, found below, were presented in both English and *isi*Zulu.

A. What are some of the things you learnt in the book about apartheid South Africa that you found most surprising because of the way things have totally changed in your experience in the democratic South Africa? Are there other things that have not really changed?[2]

Ikuphi okufunde kulendaba okukushaqisile mayelana nobandlululo uma ubuka indlela izinto esezishintshe ngayo kwi Ningizimu ekhululekile. Ingabe kukhona okungashintshile?

OR

B. In reading this book, are there any events from your childhood that you found to be similar or/and different from that of Noah's, even though you are not biracial? How did these events shape your thinking and life?

Uma ufunda lendaba ka Noah ingabe kukhona okukhumbulile ngempilo yakho yobungane okufanayo noma kumbe okuhlukile yize wena ungesiyona inhlotshana? Lezizimo ziyakhe kanjani indlela ocabanga ngayo nangempilo yakho?

One hundred and sixty-one first-year students in the Office Management Technology programme in the Faculty of Management Sciences at this UoT participated in this study. The students were selected by convenience sampling, as they were conveniently available by virtue of being registered for the Communication module taught by this study's PI. The participants' written work was completed during a formal assessment activity for which the students received a continuous assessment grade that contributed to their final grade in the module. After this formal assessment was completed, a survey composed of four open-ended questions was administered to all students in the class to learn about their experiences of and reactions to having the opportunity to use TL for this assessment activity. The project had ethical clearance from this UoT (i.e., the study's research site and the location where the study was registered and funded). Prior to analysing the students' test papers and test marks, as well as asking them to participate in the open-ended survey component of this study, the PI obtained consent from each participant.

7.   Methods of Analysis

We employed two methods of analysis to answer this study's research questions. The first method, textual analysis, was initially developed by Tesch (1991) and has been further developed by Hungwe (2019) for the purposes of TL research to analyse how

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2   We note that this question is slightly ungrammatical. We have decided to keep it in its original form, since this grammatical structure was used in the original assessment tool students were given.

students use language and engage in meaning making processes in their communicative practices. We used the textual analysis method to understand if and how students used the earlier introduced genre conventions and discourse markers of the traditional academic essay when writing the essay in either *isi*Zulu or a combination of *isi*Zulu and English. Our analyses of the students' texts focused on how flexibly the students made use of the selected languages as informed by the TL theory. Second, after conducting this textual analysis of how students employed the genre conventions and discourse markers in their essays when engaging in TL, we also asked students to respond to a short survey composed of four open-ended questions to answer this study's first and third research questions. We first told students about TL and that they could use this approach on the day of the assessment to understand, as per our first research question, the extent to which TL practices are common and "natural" among bi-/multilingual individuals (García & Wei 2014). Our final research question sought to understand the students' reactions to having the opportunity to employ this tool for assessment purposes and their experiences using TL, if they chose to do so, or not using TL, if they chose otherwise.

8.   Findings: Dependent and Independent Patterns

As mentioned earlier in this article, the participants were able to choose what language(s) they could use to write their essays—English, *isi*Zulu, or a combination of the two languages. Seventy-six participants answered in either *isi*Zulu or a combination of both *isi*Zulu and English. Among these 76 participants, 25 adopted the one-way or independent pattern to TL, that is, they wrote in *isi*Zulu only, as shown in the sample below:

> *Ngesikhathi sobandlululo e-Ningizimu Afrika [During apartheid in South Africa] …*

The remaining 51 adopted the two-way or dependent pattern, as per the sample below:

> *Umuntu ohlala e-Ningizimu Afrika, [A person who lives in South Africa] regardless of your race, is …*

That almost half the participants (76 out of 161) chose to employ TL can potentially demonstrate that many students have a desire to liberate themselves from the monolingual approach of knowing in order to improve their access and success in education. The high number of students that opted to engage in TL, despite having only been informed of the approach on the day of the assessment, supports García and Wei's argument (2014) that TL practices are common among bi-/multilingual individuals. Writing in *isi*Zulu-only when reading the original text in English and writing in both languages indicates students' engagement with TL in assessment; they drew from two languages available in their linguistic repertoire to express gained knowledge (Baker, 2011; García, 2009; García & Kano, 2014; Wei, 2018). The flexible approach empowered the participants to explore their full creative expressions (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Makalela, 2015). The high

number of students who employed TL tools in their responses to the essay questions indicates that, unlike in other contexts (e.g. Charalambous, Charalambous, & Zembylas, 2016 study in Greek Cyprus), there was not a significant amount of resistance to TL.

9.   Findings: Textual Analysis

The following sections provide selected excerpts of analyses from participants' responses to the first essay question. The excerpts illustrate how the students used their bi-literacy capacities to employ the conventions of the academic essay. By analysing the use of genre conventions in the students' produced texts, the study offers insights into how students can draw from their experiences with language practice to illustrate their knowledge when they write. The textual and language analysis approach is apt for a study on translanguaging theory where the premise is the bilingual or multilingual students' flexible use of their linguistic repertoire and bilateral skills in order to communicate meaningfully in writing (Baker, 2011; Vogel & García, 2017; Velasco & García, 2014). In the same breath, the analysis of the essay writing genre product explores the extent to which the participants engaged in their meaning making processes by drawing from the different languages at their disposal. The languages they are proficient in would enable them to use the vocabulary and phrases they are comfortable employing in a meaningful way, rather than confining themselves to one language with which they might not be as familiar.

10.   Introductory paragraph

As illustrated in the excerpts of introductory paragraphs in this section, the participants who employed TL were able to use the expected patterns of a preliminary sentence (PS) that provided the reader with the introduction to the overarching topic, an argument (AR) and a roadmap (RM) to describe the sub-points they made in the body paragraphs to support the argument in their texts.

> *Lengxoxo imayelana nengikufundile kuyo lendaba* [This essay is about what I read in the book] (PS) *okungishaqisile* [what surprised me] … *esezishintshe ngayo kwi Ningizimu ekhululekile* [what has changed in the democratic South Africa] (AR). *Ngizosho amaphuzu amathathu* [I will mention three points] … (RM).

> In this essay I will discuss … (PS) about apartheid that I found most surprising … democratic South Africa (AR). I will also discuss some of the things that have not really changed. I will use four examples which are education … (RM).

These excerpts clearly illustrate the students' abilities to employ the genre convention of an introduction to an academic essay when employing the tool of TL.

11.   Body and paragraphs

The body of an essay is composed of a series of paragraphs with each paragraph having a topic sentence (TS), which introduces the reader to a sub-argument that supports the writer's overarching claim about the issue, disciplinary appropriate evidence (AE) and a concluding sentence (CS).

> *Kanti kunjalo nje kulenkululeko kukhona okungaka shintshi* [At the same time, there is a lot that has not changed in this democracy] (TS) *… abamnyama basafunda ngolimi okungesilona olabo akukashintsi* [black people are still taught in a foreign language] (AE).

> In the apartheid time black children were put in their class and … (TS) as we see Trevor going to the "A" class … (AE). *… Okunye ukuthi* [The other thing] *uma uyingane eyinhlonthsana* [if you were a coloured] … (AE). *Kodwa kulesikhathi samanje …* [But in this period …] (CS).

These two excerpts illustrate the students' abilities to develop, synthesise, organise and clarify their ideas as they shuffled across languages.

12.   Conclusion and signal words

The essay as a genre contains concluding paragraphs marked by their use of a signal word (SW). The SW precedes the summary (SM) of the discussion and a connection with the introductory paragraph (CI), which can be followed by closing remarks (CR).

> *Sengiphetha* [In conclusion] (SW) *ngingasho nje ukuthi nathi siyindlu emnyama besingajabula* [I can say that we would be happy as black people] *ukuba nathi kesinikwe ithuba lokufunda ngolimi lwethu* to be given the opportunity to learn in our own languages … (CR).

> In conclusion (SW), I have highlighted a few things that I found surprising during apartheid in South Africa (SM). Most have changed, but, some things are still the same (CI). Therefore, democracy is a work-in-progress and hopefully someday we will live under a fully democratic South Africa (CR).

The above excerpts illustrate how the students were able to succinctly and persuasively close their essay's argument in a creative and analytical manner whilst drawing from their developed skills across languages.

13. Vocabulary and grammar

Vocabulary constitutes words and phrases (WP) used to communicate the target knowledge meaningfully. Grammar (GR) is the correct use of particular words to connect such phrases to ensure the text is a semantic unit.

> Itshe belome inhlaba [There was scarcity] (WP) *kwezamabhizinisi* [in business] *kubantu abansundu* [for black people] *kodwa* [but] (GR) *manje* [now] *zimbiwe insele* [they are in abundance] (WP).

> *Umangabe umuntu wesilisa webala elimhlophe* [When a white man] had sex with a black woman they would conclude by saying the man was drunk but (GR) the woman will face charges.

Participants were able to effectively and creatively draw from their L1 vocabulary as evident in their use of idioms from their L1 that do not have an equivalent in the L2 (*"Itshe belome inhlaba"* [scarcity]; *"zimbiwe insele"* [abundance]). These excerpts illustrate that TL can provide a safe space for the writers to coin vocabulary from the L1 to engage in an academic activity such as writing an academic essay. Similarly, Stroud and Kerfoot (2013) have argued that translanguaging can facilitate the development of academic registers in African languages that can enable students to function as co-creators of knowledge.

14. Cohesion

Cohesion is the use of connecting words to link sentences and paragraphs. As discussed earlier in this article, these words are used to accomplish reference (R), substitution (S), ellipsis (E) and conjunction (C).

> *Asikho* [We are not] free *ngokwanele namanje ngoba* [enough even now because] (C) *umhlaba wethu awukabuyeli kubantu abamnyama* [our land is not back in the hands of black people]. We (R) want our (R) land.

> Apartheid started long ago. It (R) occurred in South Africa and (C) left many people in tears.

In the above excerpts, the use of cohesive devices helps to reinforce the meaning in the text and bring together its different components to form a unified whole. Particularly important in these examples is that these cohesive devices were correctly used in the students' L1 and easily transferred to their L2 writing (Cummins, 2000).

15.   Findings: Experiences with Translanguaging

In this section we reflect on findings from the open-ended survey that was administered to the participants. The survey questions were as follows: 1) How did you feel when you were presented with the test questions and instructions in both English and *isi*Zulu and presented with the opportunity to respond to the test questions in the language of your choice? 2) What language did you choose to use to answer the essay questions? 3) What was your reason for selecting this language? 4) Do you feel you benefitted in any way by having the test questions and instructions written in *isi*Zulu?

16.   Reactions to the assessment

The participants had many positive reactions to having the opportunity to be asked questions in both languages as well as use either language for assessment in their module. For example, two students expressed feelings of happiness and surprise at this opportunity. One explained that she was "surprised and excited/happy at the same time". Similarly, another student wrote that they were "happy to see my language." A third student expressed the feeling of being "relieved" at having the space to communicate their response in a language of their choice. Perhaps such feelings come from many students having never been exposed to such an opportunity in their schooling careers. From their responses, it appeared that they had not expected to experience this type of opportunity in a university context, since it is known that higher education institutions strictly employ English as the medium of instruction. Thus, the opportunity to use whatever language the students felt comfortable communicating in via the tool of TL was welcomed because it allowed them to employ one of what have unfortunately been perceived as the so-called "low status languages," thus giving them an opportunity to have "a voice in education" (Mwinda & van der Walt, 2015: 102). As one student wrote, it was "good for language equality [and] represented not [sic] to racism," illustrating Child's (2016) claim that the translanguaging approach can be viewed as a move toward liberation as it promotes language equity in the higher education context.

Other students' reactions to this experience were less positive. They, similar to the students above, expressed surprise that they could use the language of their choice to respond to the essay question. Yet, their surprise could be conceptualized as being more negative as it led these particular students to have many questions and become distracted during the evaluation process. For instance, one student described being "surprised and confused, because it was the first time ever seeing the use of an African language in a test and having to choose a language I like." Similarly, another student reported being set off track by their surprise, which caused them to "re-read the instruction[s] five times to make sure I understood well." A third student expressed being "amazed" by the experience; yet, feeling it was "unexpected [and] unbelievable" and they "wondered if it was allowed to use *isi*Zulu in an English test in an institution of higher learning." Finally, another student reported being "distracted because it was unexpected." It is

obvious from these excerpts from the surveys that although the students were perhaps happy that they could be asked essay questions and use their language of choice to respond to such questions in an examination situation, it was also an opportunity which distracted them from the task at hand. Their difficulties in trying to fathom if using *isi*Zulu was allowed in such a context also highlights how little has been done to implement and cascade South Africa's national language policy in practice throughout all sectors of the country's education system. If such policies were actually affected in primary and secondary levels of schooling in South Africa, these students would have been well aware of their right to use any of South Africa's officially recognized languages in this assessment. In other words, if this policy were truly implemented and enacted in earlier years of schooling, students, upon arrival at university, would be well aware that they could use their language of choice for purposes of evaluation rather than be "shocked" to be in such a situation.

Equally important is the role of higher education institutions in promoting multilingualism in society and in education. Some universities have language policies only on paper with few of these policies have been implemented in practice (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014). For instance, many universities in South Africa still struggle to have basic signage on their campuses written in languages other than English or multilingualism in the classroom. Yet, transformation in this regard is also happening at South African universities. For example, both the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Inyuvesi YakwaZulu-Natali) and the Durban University of Technology (Inyuvesi YaseThekwini Yezobuchwepheshe) recently changed their logos to indicate support for national and institutional language policies. Other institutions, such as the University of Cape Town, specifically in its Department of Accounting, has made strides toward instituting the national language policy by developing teaching materials and making disciplinary terminology available in the country's different languages. Students at these institutions, witnessing the use of more than one language around them every day, would perhaps express less surprised than the students at the university where this study was conducted.

17. Reasons for language selection

In addition to understanding the students' reactions to this opportunity, we also wanted to understand what reasons informed their choice about which language(s) to employ in responding to this assessment's essay questions. For those students who chose to respond in English, only (53% of the students), the reasons ranged from having relatively negative perceptions about *isi*Zulu, stating that they chose to respond in English because "it is better understood," "because it is popular and most important" and "because I thought I will be penalised for using *isi*Zulu." Other students' reasons for selecting English over *isi*Zulu to respond to the essay prompts were less negative and more functional. They described selecting English "because the book was read and remembered in English," it "made more sense for me [to use English]", or because they were "only used to answering in English and came prepared that way." Finally, one student explained that they chose to use English to improve their proficiency in the

language: "to help me improve/polish it since I'm not good at it." The students' reasons for choosing to respond in English to the assessment's prompt are indicative of both "monoglossic" and "diglossic" attitudes (Fishman, 1972; García & Lin, 2016). Yet, those attitudes based on ignorance of existing and available language policies cannot be blamed on students but rather the institutions that are intended to serve them.

In contrast, the remaining 47% of participants who opted to respond in either *isi*Zulu or both languages explained that the reasons for their language selections stemmed from their levels of comfort and proficiency in using those languages. For example, one student wrote that they chose to write in both languages yet drew more heavily on "English for better expression." Another student also explained that they employed mainly one language over the other, although in this case it was *isi*Zulu, because, as they wrote, "I understood [it] better." One student explained that they employed both languages "because [they] couldn't express certain English words in *isi*Zulu." Finally, another student reported mixing languages, as it helped them "explain my answer clearly."

18.   Possible benefits of translanguaging in assessments

A third area of interest was trying to determine if and how translanguaging helped students gain an understanding of the task they were required to complete for assessment purposes. To gain insights into this issue, two questions were asked. First, students were asked if they read the test instruction in one or both languages, and what their reason was for their choice. Students who used both languages to respond to the essay questions reported that they found translanguaging to be beneficial in helping them understand the question and answering the test's two essay questions. They specifically mentioned that TL made them feel empowered, because it provided them with two ways to understand the task's instructions before attempting to respond to the essay questions. One student wrote, reading the question in both languages "helps with understanding since *isi*Zulu is my home language." Another expressed a similar experience, "two ways of understanding and options to tackle the question." A third student wrote that having the question written in both languages "made so much difference and a big one." A final excerpt from the students' responses illustrated that having this opportunity allowed for "a difference", making what was being asked of her very "clear". These findings are aligned with those of other research studies on using TL for assessment purposes, which have highlighted that having questions written in both languages can make a significant difference for many students for whom English could be a challenge as they transition from school to university (Esambe, Mosito & Pather, 2016). The responses highlighted above suggest more students read the instruction in two languages as a translanguaging strategy to adequately prepare themselves for the task at hand in which they had to write in English.

Those students who did not chose to read the question in *isi*Zulu explained that their reasons related to them not needing to "because English was understood." Another

student stated that they stuck to only reading the question in English "because the novel was read in English." Finally, one student reported that they read the question in both languages not for the necessary support but, "for the fun of it, not really for understanding." These findings illustrate that for the students who may be disadvantaged due to having lower levels of proficiency in English, TL can be an extremely important tool. It can afford them the opportunity to have deeper comprehension of the task they are being asked to perform than if the question is only written in English. For the students who will succeed anyway, it does not appear that TL is a necessary tool. Yet, from the above excerpts, it appears that having the opportunity to employ TL is key for students who do not feel extremely comfortable in English. Thus, having access to such a tool can potentially empower them and bring them to the same level, if not one beyond those who might already be empowered.

19.   Translanguaging assessment and transglossia

The final question in the survey sought to understand if the participants thought it could be helpful to extend TL as a tool to other modules at the university. Unsurprisingly, similar to earlier questions, students expressed views that were also divided on the issue. For instance, the students who felt that such an extension could be positive stated that using TL in other modules could "accommodate different students/choices." Others felt that using TL in various modules could also allow "many students [to] pass their modules", as TL could help them "understand questions clearly." Similarly, another student explained that having this opportunity would help students "who struggle with English" be able to obtain "high marks." This support for using TL "for understanding" was connected to the issue of "English [not being] a home language." The view of students who wanted to extend TL to other modules at the university resonates with researchers who promote TL theories and pedagogical approaches, suggesting that translanguaging offers "choice," helps with "understanding," and increases students' "pass" rates (see Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Makalela, 2015; 2018).

Yet, as mentioned earlier, other students were not supportive of TL being extended for teaching and learning purposes in other modules at the university. Their position stemmed from an array of reasons such as "English [being] easily understood" and the notion that "*isi*Zulu can be confusing." Others felt that the extension of TL would be "unfair to those who do not speak *isi*Zulu" and that such an approach could only be fair if "they use all nine [sic] official languages." Some students also felt that TL should not be used in other modules, because these "subjects [are] studied in English." Another reason given for not extending the tool of TL to other modules was that students felt it would prevent them from obtaining the high level of English fluency they perceived they need for the workplace. As some students explained, using TL in other modules would result in Zulus … end[ing] up knowing only *isi*Zulu and be unable to understand and answer job interview questions in English." Similarly, others said that TL would result in them "not being able to understand and improve English for use in the workplace." These latter views are again aligned to a monoglossic ideology, two dimensions of

"status and solidarity" about languages and intellectually colonised individuals (García & Lin, 2016; Makalela, 2018; Rivera & Mazak, 2017). These respondents believe there is no room for African languages in higher education, which they associate strictly with English.

20. Conclusion

This study set out to uncover how translanguaging might serve as an effective teaching and learning tool for first-year university students when learning how to write a traditional academic essay. Specifically, we sought to understand if students would choose to engage in TL when asked to write a traditional academic essay in an examination/assessment setting, how well they would employ the conventions of this genre, and what their reactions to the use of TL would be in general. In terms of our first research question, we found that almost half of the participants chose to employ either dependent or two-way TL patterning for this task. Second, and quite promising, our textual analysis of students' essays illustrated that students who used the TL approach in constructing their essays were able to successfully and creatively employ both the genre conventions of a traditional academic essay and the expected discourse markers of academic writing. Although not the specific focus of this study, we also noticed that students who used TL to respond to complete this task (i.e., they wrote in only *isi*Zulu or a combination of *isi*Zulu and English) outperformed their peers who only used English in their responses by, on average, 16% in their final grade. Although more research - particularly further quantitative investigations - is required with regard to this finding, it offers an interesting glimpse into how TL might be used as an empowering pedagogical tool for additional language users of English to learn how to write traditional academic essays. This connects to our last research question, which sought to understand how students reacted to being presented with the opportunity to engage in TL in their academic studies. Student responses illustrated that for students who already felt comfortable using English in their academic studies, employing TL was neither here nor there. In contrast, students who felt uncomfortable or lacked confidence using English in their university studies described how empowering and reassuring it was for them to be able to employ TL as a method to both comprehend and compete a writing task. In future, we recommend that similar studies be conducted by researchers and educators working in the fields of language and writing pedagogy in other universities in South Africa and other African countries. These studies can investigate how translanguaging can help students learn how to employ disciplinary specific genre conventions as well as discourse markers when writing for a variety of academic purposes (e.g., lab reports, theses, dissertations) to effectively communicate their target knowledge.

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