

Decolonising the Curriculum Through Language: Lessons from the Soweto Uprising for Contemporary South African Distance Teacher Education

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored how pre-service history teachers in a South African Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution understand and engage with the linguistic dimensions of curriculum decolonisation, drawing lessons from the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Through online semi-structured interviews with 10 student teachers, the study examined their perspectives on language as a vehicle for decolonisation in contemporary higher education. Framed by an integrated theoretical framework combining postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy, and analysed through thematic analysis, the research reveals that students recognise language as central to epistemic justice, but face institutional constraints in multilingual pedagogical practice. Findings indicate tensions between decolonial aspirations and practical implementation, with participants advocating for indigenous language integration while navigating persistent colonial language hierarchies. The study contributes to History Education scholarship and to scholarship on decolonising teacher education by demonstrating how the Soweto Uprising—as a historical and pedagogical lens—illuminates the relationship between language, epistemic justice, historical consciousness, and the preparation of history teachers. The study offers implications for curriculum reform in ODL environments.

Keywords: Decolonisation; Language policy; Soweto Uprising; History Education; Historical consciousness; Teacher education; Distance learning; Postcolonial theory

Introduction

The call to decolonise South African higher education has intensified since the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements of 2015-2016, compelling institutions to confront colonial legacies embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture.¹ Central to these decolonisation debates is the question of language—which languages are valued, who has access to knowledge in different languages, and how linguistic practices perpetuate or challenge colonial power relations. This concern echoes the historic 1976 Soweto Uprising, when thousands of Black students protested against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, sparking a watershed moment in South Africa's liberation struggle.²

History Education is a particularly important site through which to examine these dynamics. As a discipline, History has historically been used both to legitimise colonial narratives and to serve as a site of resistance and counter-memory. The way History is taught—whose stories are told, in whose language, and from whose epistemological standpoint—shapes students' historical consciousness and their sense of identity and agency.³ For pre-service History teachers, developing a critical understanding of language, memory, and decolonisation is therefore not peripheral, but central to their professional formation.

Nearly five decades after the Soweto Uprising, language remains a contentious issue in South African education. Despite constitutional recognition of 12 official languages and post-apartheid language policies promoting multilingualism, English dominates higher education, marginalising African languages and the knowledge systems they carry.⁴ This linguistic colonialism raises critical questions for contemporary teacher education:

- How do pre-service History teachers in a South African ODL context understand the relationship between language and curriculum decolonisation?
- What lessons from the Soweto Uprising inform their pedagogical perspectives in contemporary distance-based History teacher education?

¹ S Heleta, "Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa", *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1(1), 2016, pp. 1-8.

² South African History Online. The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising. *South African History Online*, 2013. <https://sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>.

³ S Heleta, "Decolonisation of higher education...", *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1(1), 2016, pp. 1-8.

⁴ VN Webb, *Language in South Africa: The role of language in national transformation, reconstruction and development* (John Benjamin Publishing, 2002).

- How can ODL institutions prepare History teachers to challenge linguistic hierarchies and implement multilingual, decolonial pedagogy in schools?

These questions are grounded in the following research problem: despite post-apartheid constitutional commitments to multilingualism and over a decade of calls to decolonise higher education,⁵ pre-service History teacher education in South Africa has engaged insufficiently with language as a site of historical struggle and epistemic justice. This gap is particularly pronounced in ODL institutions, which serve linguistically diverse student populations, but whose materials and assessment practices remain predominantly English-medium. This study investigated these questions through a qualitative case study of 10 pre-service History teachers enrolled at a South African ODL university.

History education provides a particularly relevant context for examining decolonisation, as the discipline has historically been used to legitimise colonial narratives while simultaneously serving as a site of resistance and counter-memory. The ODL context adds a further dimension: distance education democratises access for students from diverse linguistic and geographic backgrounds, however, it also risks reinforcing linguistic colonialism when materials and assessments are predominantly in English and when students lack opportunities for collaborative multilingual engagement. The distance education environment thus shapes the participants' experiences of language, access to materials, and pedagogical imagination in ways that are directly relevant to the study's findings.

The research was guided by the following objectives:

- To explore how pre-service History teachers enrolled in an ODL institution conceptualise the relationship between language and curriculum decolonisation.
- To examine how student teachers understand the Soweto Uprising's relevance to contemporary language policies and practices in distance-based History teacher education.
- To identify the challenges and opportunities specific to the ODL environment for implementing multilingual, decolonial pedagogy in History teacher education.
- To generate recommendations for integrating linguistic justice and epistemic equity into History teacher education programmes offered through ODL institutions.

⁵ A Mbembe, "Decolonizing the university: New directions", *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 2016, pp. 29-45.

The study is theoretically framed by postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy, explained fully in the theoretical framework section. The Soweto Uprising functions throughout this article not merely as historical background, but as the central historical and pedagogical lens through which language, epistemic justice, and the preparation of History teachers are examined.

Literature review

Decolonising the curriculum: Conceptual foundations

Decolonisation in higher education encompasses multiple dimensions: epistemological, curricular, pedagogical, and institutional. Scholars such as Heleta argue that at its core, decolonisation involves interrogating whose knowledge counts, challenging Eurocentric epistemologies, and centring marginalised knowledge systems.⁶ Scholars distinguish between superficial diversity initiatives and substantive decolonisation that transforms power relations and knowledge hierarchies.⁷ Mbembe argues that decolonising the university requires reimagining the institution as an African intellectual project rather than a colonial transplant, fundamentally questioning what constitutes valid knowledge and who has the authority to produce it.⁸

In the South African context, decolonisation scholarship emphasises the continued marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems, despite post-apartheid reforms. Ndlovu-Gatsheni critiques the persistence of coloniality—the ongoing patterns of power and knowledge production established during colonialism—which continues to shape curriculum content, research agendas, and pedagogical practices.⁹ Le Grange cautions against simplistic approaches to decolonisation that replace one hegemonic framework with another, advocating instead for pluriversal thinking that embraces multiple, coexisting knowledge systems.¹⁰

⁶ S Heleta, “Decolonisation of higher education ...”, *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1(1), 2016, pp. 1-8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9>

⁷ JD Jansen, “The lost scholarship of changing curricula”, *South African Journal of Science*, 113(5/6), 2017, pp. 1-2.

⁸ A Mbembe, “Decolonizing the university: New directions”, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 2016, pp. 29-45.

⁹ SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonization* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2013).

¹⁰ L Le Grange, “Decolonising the university curriculum”, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(1), 2016, pp. 1-12.

Language as site of colonial power and resistance

Language occupies a central place in decolonial theory, because it structures thought, mediates knowledge transmission, and reflects power relations. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal work on linguistic imperialism argues that colonial languages displace indigenous epistemologies and alienate colonised peoples from their cultural heritage.¹¹ Language policy in education, thus, becomes a mechanism for either perpetuating or challenging colonial domination. Makoni and Pennycook extend this analysis by critiquing the invention of languages as discrete, bounded systems during colonialism, arguing for more fluid understandings of linguistic practice.¹²

In South Africa, language policy has always been intimately connected to political power. Under apartheid, Afrikaans and English were privileged, while African languages were systematically underdeveloped and associated with Bantu Education's inferior curriculum.¹³ The post-apartheid Constitution recognises 12 official languages and mandates language rights, yet implementation remains uneven. Research shows that English hegemony persists in higher education, with African languages rarely used as languages of learning and teaching despite their constitutional status.¹⁴

Scholars identify multiple barriers to multilingual higher education: lack of academic terminology in African languages, insufficient learning materials, staff capacity constraints, and persistent ideologies that associate English with modernity and African languages with tradition.¹⁵ However, others argue that these barriers are not insurmountable and that the real obstacle is political will and commitment to linguistic justice.¹⁶ Successful multilingual pedagogies in primary and secondary education suggest that similar approaches could be adapted for higher education contexts.¹⁷

¹¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

¹² S Makoni and A Pennycook, "Disinventing and reconstituting languages", *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 4(2-3), 2007, pp. 137-156.

¹³ S Vally and E Motala, *Education, economy and society* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2014), pp. 67-92.

¹⁴ VN Webb, *Language in South Africa*, pp. 145-178.

¹⁵ KK Prah, "Mother tongue education, literacy and multilingualism in Africa", G Kamwendo, J Dudu and AM Chebanne (eds.), *Multilingualism in education and communities in Southern Africa*, pp. 31-34

¹⁶ KK Prah, "Mother-tongue education in Africa...", pp. 35-39.

¹⁷ L Makalela, "Moving out of linguistic boxes: The effects of translanguaging strategies for multilingual classrooms", *Language and Education*, 29(3), 2015, pp. 200-217.

The Soweto Uprising: Historical context and educational significance

The Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976 stands as the central historical reference point for this study. Thousands of Black students in Soweto marched against the apartheid government's decree that mathematics and social sciences be taught in Afrikaans in secondary schools.¹⁸ The protest was met with police violence, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of young people over subsequent weeks and months. The Soweto Uprising became a turning point in South Africa's liberation struggle, galvanising international anti-apartheid solidarity and inspiring continued resistance within the country.¹⁹

The 1976 protests were fundamentally about language as a tool of oppression. Students and parents rejected Afrikaans not only because of practical difficulties, but because they recognised language policy as a mechanism for political control and cultural domination.²⁰ As the student slogan proclaimed, they were "fighting for the right to be taught in a language they could understand".²¹ The uprising demonstrated that language policy is never merely technical, but always deeply political, connected to questions of identity, dignity, and self-determination. For History Education, the Soweto Uprising offers a powerful pedagogical case study: it illustrates how the language of instruction is not a neutral technical choice, but a site of power where epistemological justice is won or lost. Teaching this history critically can help pre-service History teachers develop the historical consciousness needed to understand contemporary language debates as continuations of earlier struggles.

Historical scholarship on the Soweto Uprising emphasises its educational dimensions beyond language alone. The protests challenged Bantu Education's entire system of inferior schooling designed to prepare Black South Africans for subordinate roles in an apartheid society.²² Students demanded quality education that would equip them for full citizenship and intellectual development. Their struggle connected language rights to broader questions of educational justice, knowledge access, and human dignity. Contemporary commemorations of the Soweto Uprising often emphasise youth activism and courage, History Education scholarship increasingly highlights its pedagogical lessons for present-

¹⁸ The Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974 mandated that Black secondary schools use Afrikaans as the medium of instruction for mathematics, arithmetic, and social studies, while other subjects would be taught in English. This policy was deeply resented as Afrikaans was associated with apartheid oppression.

¹⁹ Various sources estimate between 176 and 700 deaths during the uprising and subsequent months of resistance. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission later documented many of these casualties.

²⁰ S Vally and E Motlale, *Education, economy and society*, 2014, pp. 78-81.

²¹ This slogan appeared on many placards during the June 16 protests and subsequent demonstrations.

²² Bantu Education, implemented through the Bantu Education Act of 1953, deliberately provided inferior education to Black South Africans, designed to prepare them for subordinate roles in apartheid society.

day decolonisation efforts,²³ particularly in understanding students as agents of historical change and in recognising language policy as a site of political struggle.²⁴

Teacher education and decolonisation

Teacher education plays a critical role in educational transformation, because teachers mediate curriculum implementation and shape classroom knowledge practices. However, research indicates that South African teacher education programmes inadequately prepare teachers to teach for social justice, critically engage curriculum, or implement decolonial pedagogies.²⁵ Many programmes remain wedded to technical-rational approaches focused on skills transmission rather than critical reflection on power, knowledge, and identity.²⁶ Scholars advocate for reconceptualising teacher education through decolonial frameworks that centre critical consciousness, reflexivity, and commitment to social justice.²⁷ This includes examining how teachers' own educational experiences have been shaped by colonial knowledge systems and developing pedagogical approaches that validate diverse knowledge forms.²⁸ Language is central to this project, as teachers must be equipped to challenge linguistic hierarchies and implement multilingual pedagogies that honour students' home languages.²⁹

Distance education presents particular opportunities and challenges for decolonising teacher education. On one hand, distance learning institutions in South Africa serve diverse student populations who bring varied linguistic and cultural resources, potentially enriching decolonial conversations.³⁰ Distance education can also reach students in rural areas and provide flexibility for working adults who might otherwise be excluded

²³ G Weldon, "Memory, identity and the politics of curriculum construction in transition societies: Rwanda and South Africa", *Perspectives in Education*, 27(2), 2009, pp. 118-122.

²⁴ P Vale, L Hamilton and E Prinsloo, *Intellectual traditions in South Africa: Ideas, individuals and institutions*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014, pp. 75-78.

²⁵ Y Sayed, A Badroodien, T Salmon and Z McDonald, "Social justice and teacher education in South Africa," T Barkatsas and A Bertram (eds.), *Global learning in the 21st Century* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), pp. 61-80.

²⁶ Y Sayed, A Badroodien, T Salmon and Z McDonald, "Social justice ..." T Barkatsas and A Bertram (eds.), *Global learning ...*, pp. 68-71.

²⁷ M Zembylas and V Bozalek, "Towards a critical pedagogy for the Anthropocene", K Misiaszek (ed.), *Educating the global environmental citizen*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 41-52.

²⁸ PE Barnett and K Teise, K, "Initial teacher education for social justice in South Africa: A higher education policy perspective", *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 6(1), 2024, pp. 72-89.

²⁹ L Makalela, "Moving out of linguistic boxes: the effects of translanguaging strategies for multilingual classrooms", *Language and Education*, 2015, pp. 202-205.

³⁰ Distance education institutions in South Africa serve significantly more diverse student populations than residential universities, with higher proportions of African language speakers and students from rural areas.

from teacher education. On the other hand, distance learning may reinforce linguistic colonialism if materials are predominantly in English and pedagogies fail to leverage students' multilingual competencies.³¹

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by one integrated theoretical framework combining postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy. These are not separate frameworks, but complementary theoretical traditions that together provide analytical tools for understanding colonial power relations and possibilities for transformation through education. Postcolonial theory provides analytical tools for examining how colonial power relations persist in contemporary knowledge systems, institutions, and practices.³² Key concepts include hybridity (the mixing of coloniser and colonised cultures), ambivalence (the complex, contradictory nature of colonial relationships), and subalternity (the silencing of marginalised voices).³³ Applied to education, postcolonial theory reveals how curricula privilege Western knowledge while marginalising Indigenous epistemologies, and how language policies perpetuate colonial hierarchies even in nominally decolonised contexts.³⁴

Critical pedagogy, drawing from Paulo Freire's work, emphasises education as a practice of freedom that enables learners to critically examine and transform oppressive social conditions.³⁵ Freire's concepts of conscientisation (developing critical consciousness), dialogue (horizontal communication that respects all participants' knowledge), and praxis (reflection and action to transform the world) inform this study's understanding of decolonial teaching and learning.³⁶ Critical pedagogy recognises education as inherently political and teachers as potential agents of social change.³⁷

These frameworks guided both data collection and analysis. During coding, concepts such as conscientisation and praxis shaped the identification of units related to critical awareness and action; hybridity and ambivalence informed coding of participants' complex, contradictory relationships with English and African languages; subalternity and epistemic justice guided attention to silenced voices and knowledge systems. In the

³¹ Learning materials in distance education have historically been text-heavy and English-dominant, though some institutions are exploring multimedia and multilingual options.

³² A Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

³³ HK Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁴ A Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 2002), pp. 87-115.

³⁵ P Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000).

³⁶ P Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed...*, pp. 79-86.

³⁷ P Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed...*, pp. 72-75.

interpretive phase, the frameworks provided the conceptual language for explaining why participants' experiences take the forms they do within ODL structures shaped by colonial legacies.

Synthesising these frameworks, the study examines how pre-service teachers navigate postcolonial linguistic landscapes while developing critical pedagogical orientations. Language serves as both an object of analysis (examining colonial language policies) and a medium through which critical consciousness develops (using dialogue to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions). The Soweto Uprising functions as a historical case that illuminates the political nature of educational language policy and inspires contemporary decolonial practice.

Research methodology

Research design

The current study employed a qualitative case study design, which enables in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts.³⁸ The case was bounded as pre-service History teachers at a specific South African ODL university who were engaged with questions of curriculum decolonisation and language policy. Case study methodology was particularly appropriate for examining how individuals make meaning of their experiences and for generating rich, contextual understanding.³⁹

The research adopted an interpretivist paradigm, recognising knowledge as socially constructed and emphasising participants' subjective understandings.⁴⁰ While this study's engagement with power, coloniality, and linguistic inequality might also suggest a critical paradigm, the interpretivist orientation was selected, as the primary aim was to understand how pre-service teachers make meaning of their experiences, rather than to critique structural conditions from a pre-determined emancipatory standpoint. The interpretivist focus allowed for a more open, participant-centred exploration of meaning, which aligned with the study's inductive-deductive thematic analysis. The critical theoretical framework, however, informed the interpretation of findings, ensuring that power relations and coloniality remained central to the analysis.⁴¹

³⁸ RK Yin, *Case study research: Design and methods*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014).

³⁹ RE Stake, *The art of case study research* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995).

⁴⁰ W Creswell, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013), pp. 24-27.

⁴¹ L Tikly and T Bond, "Towards a postcolonial research ethics in comparative and international education",

Research context

The current study was conducted at a South African ODL university that serves predominantly working adults, students from rural and peri-urban areas, and students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The institution's student profile includes high proportions of African language speakers who study through English-medium materials. This context is directly relevant to the study's focus, as the tension between the institution's linguistically diverse student body and its English-dominant pedagogical infrastructure is precisely the site where decolonisation challenges play out in practice.

Participant selection

Ten participants were purposively selected from third- and fourth-year students majoring in History education at the institution. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research seeking information-rich cases.⁴² Selection criteria included enrolment in the History education programme, completion of at least one module on South African history, enrolment in modules that had engaged with decolonisation debates as part of the curriculum (rather than self-reported 'awareness', which may have introduced self-selection bias), and willingness to participate. The sample size of 10 was not based on claims of data saturation. Rather, the sample size enabled rich, in-depth exploration within a bounded case, consistent with the interpretive case study design.

Participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds. Five indicated isiZulu as their home language, two spoke Sesotho, two Setswana, and one Xitsonga. All were multilingual, with varying levels of proficiency in English, which most had not spoken as a first language before entering formal education. Eight participants were mature students (over 25 years old) who had entered distance education after working or raising families. This profile is consistent with published demographic data from the institution, which reports that the majority of History education students are mature, multilingual, and from non-English home language backgrounds.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining focus on research

Compare, 43(4), 2013, pp. 422-442.

⁴² W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry* ... (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), pp. 156-158.

objectives.⁴³ An interview guide was developed covering four main areas: participants' understanding of curriculum decolonisation; their perspectives on language in education; their knowledge of and reflections on the Soweto Uprising; and their views on preparing to teach History in multilingual classrooms.

Sample interview questions included: 'How do you understand the relationship between language and decolonisation in your own education?'; 'What does the Soweto Uprising mean to you as a future History teacher, and how do you see it connecting to contemporary debates about language in education?'; and 'What challenges do you anticipate in implementing multilingual approaches in your History classroom?'

Interviews were conducted in participants' language of choice. Nine participants chose English, while one requested a combination of English and isiZulu. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted through a video conferencing platform, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Using digital communication aligns with the distance learning context and enabled participation across geographic locations. The researcher's role as a staff member was disclosed at the outset and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and that it would have no bearing on participants' academic standing, in order to mitigate the power differential inherent in researcher-participant relationships in educational settings.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset.⁴⁴ The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.⁴⁵ Analysis was both inductive (themes emerging from data) and deductive (informed by theoretical framework and research questions).

Theoretical concepts from the integrated framework guided the coding process. Conscientisation informed codes related to critical awareness of linguistic hierarchies; praxis shaped codes related to proposed pedagogical strategies; hybridity and ambivalence guided attention to participants' complex relationships with English; and epistemic justice informed codes about language and knowledge access. This deductive layer complemented the inductive identification of themes from the data.

⁴³ W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry...* pp. 163-165.

⁴⁴ V Braun and V Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 2006, pp. 77-101.

⁴⁵ V Braun and V Clarke, "Using thematic...", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 2006, pp. 87-93.

The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the process, acknowledging how personal background as a South African educator influenced interpretation. Themes were reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness, and representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the university's research ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Pseudonyms (Student 1, Student 2, etc.) are used to protect anonymity. Participants could withdraw at any time without penalty, though none chose to do so. The researcher was mindful of power dynamics as a faculty member, emphasising the voluntary nature of participation and ensuring it would not affect academic standing.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies enhanced the study's trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, reflexivity about researcher positionality, and member checking, where participants reviewed transcript summaries to confirm accuracy.⁴⁶ Transferability was supported through thick description of context and participants, enabling readers to assess applicability to other settings.⁴⁷ Dependability was enhanced through maintaining an audit trail of research decisions and analytical processes.⁴⁸ Confirmability was pursued by grounding interpretations in data and acknowledging researcher subjectivity.⁴⁹

Presentation of findings

Analysis revealed five major themes regarding student teachers' perspectives on language, decolonisation, and the Soweto Uprising's contemporary relevance:

Theme 1: Language as a carrier of knowledge and identity

All participants articulated strong connections between language and identity, emphasising that language carries cultural knowledge and shapes worldviews. Student 3 explained:

⁴⁶ YS Lincoln and EG Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1985), pp. 318-319.

⁴⁷ YS Lincoln and EG Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*... pp. 316-319.

⁴⁸ YS Lincoln and EG Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*... pp. 318-319.

⁴⁹ YS Lincoln and EG Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*... pp. 320-321.

"When we use English only, we are not just changing words. We are changing how we think, how we see the world. Our languages have wisdom that cannot be translated."

This perspective aligns with postcolonial critiques of linguistic imperialism, recognising language as epistemologically significant rather than merely instrumental⁵⁰.

Several participants connected language to ubuntu philosophy and communal knowledge systems. Student 7 stated:

"In my language, Setswana, we say 'motho ke motho ka batho'—a person is a person through other people. This way of thinking about humanity is built into the language. When we only learn in English, we lose these philosophies."

This comment illustrates how indigenous languages embed ethical frameworks and relational ontologies that differ from Western individualism.

Participants also described the emotional and psychological dimensions of language use. Student 5 shared:

"When I read History in English, I understand the facts. But when I discuss it in isiZulu with my family, I feel it differently. The meaning goes deeper."

This affective dimension suggests that linguistic decolonisation involves not just cognitive access, but also an emotional and spiritual connection to knowledge. However, participants acknowledged complexity in language-identity relationships. Student 9 noted:

"I feel South African, but I think partly in English now after so many years of education. Does that mean I am colonized? Or can English also be African?"

This ambivalence reflects the hybridity central to postcolonial experience, where colonial languages become indigenised and identities resist simple categories.

Theme 2: Recognition of linguistic colonialism in higher education

Participants demonstrated critical awareness of how linguistic hierarchies operate in their own education. Student 2 observed:

"All our textbooks are in English. All our lectures are in English. Even when we write about African history, we must write in a European language. How is this decolonised?"

⁵⁰ Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind ...*

This comment captures frustration with the contradiction between decolonisation rhetoric and continued linguistic colonialism. Participants also described how instruction in English-medium disadvantages multilingual students. Student 4 explained:

"I know the History content. But sometimes I cannot express my ideas in English well enough, so I get lower marks. The lecturer thinks I do not understand, but I do—just not in English."

This highlights how language requirements function as gatekeeping mechanisms that conflate linguistic proficiency with intellectual ability. In the ODL context, this problem is compounded by the absence of face-to-face interaction: participants cannot code-switch with peers or lecturers in real time, and assessments offer no flexibility for home language use.

Some participants discussed the scarcity of learning materials in African languages. Student 1 noted:

"I wanted to write my assignment about the Soweto Uprising in isiZulu, but I could not find any sources. All the books are in English or Afrikaans. So even our own history is available only in colonial languages."

This is a particularly pointed observation for a History Education context: if the historiography of the Soweto Uprising itself is only accessible in colonial languages, then the decolonisation of History curriculum is constrained at the most basic level of epistemological access.

Participants also recognised institutional structures that maintain English dominance. Student 6 stated:

"The university says we should use African languages, but then all the assessment is in English. How can we develop academic language in our own languages if there is no opportunity to practice?"

Furthermore, the theme of internalised linguistic hierarchies also emerged. Student 8 admitted:

"Sometimes I feel that English is more academic, more serious. I have to remind myself this is not true, that my language is equally capable of complex thought. But the feeling is there from years of education that treated African languages as inferior."

This reflects how colonial language ideologies become internalised, requiring conscious effort to deconstruct.

Theme 3: The Soweto Uprising as inspiration for current struggles

Participants engaged with the Soweto Uprising not only as a historical event, but as a pedagogical resource for understanding contemporary language debates—which is precisely the contribution that this article argues History Education can make to decolonisation. Student 10 stated:

“When I learned about June 16, I thought it was just about Afrikaans. But now I see it was about dignity, about the right to learn in a way that respects you. That is the same thing we need today.”

Participants admired the courage and agency of the Soweto students. Student 3 reflected:

“Those students were younger than us, but they stood up to the whole apartheid government. They knew education was important enough to risk their lives. That inspires me to be brave about challenging injustice in education today.”

This admiration positions the Soweto students as role models for contemporary activism. Most participants noted historical continuities between apartheid language imposition and current English dominance. Student 5 observed:

“Then it was Afrikaans forced on Black students. Now it is English forced on all students. The methods are different, but the result is the same—our languages are marginalized.”

This historical consciousness—the capacity to connect past, present, and future in structural rather than merely chronological terms—is a key goal of History Education. That participants demonstrated it in relation to language suggests that the Soweto Uprising, when taught well, can function as an entry point for developing precisely the kind of critical historical thinking that decolonial History Education requires.

Participants also reflected on the Soweto Uprising’s educational demands beyond language. Student 7 explained:

“The students wanted Bantu Education to end. They wanted quality education, not inferior education that prepared them for oppression. Today we say we must decolonize the curriculum—this is the same demand.”

This broader understanding connects language rights to comprehensive educational transformation. However, some participants noted important differences between historical and contemporary contexts. Student 2 cautioned:

“The Soweto students faced brutal violence. We have freedom to protest and speak out that they did not have. We must use that freedom wisely and not pretend our struggle is exactly the same.”

This nuanced perspective acknowledges both continuities and ruptures between apartheid and post-apartheid eras.

Theme 4: Tensions between decolonial ideals and practical constraints

While participants strongly supported linguistic decolonisation in principle, they identified numerous practical challenges. Student 6 articulated a common concern:

“I want to teach History in isiZulu so my students can understand deeply. But the textbooks are in English, the exams are in English, and most curriculum advisors speak English. How can I do this alone?”

This highlights systemic constraints that individual teachers cannot easily overcome. Other participants worried about disadvantaging students by teaching in African languages. Student 4 explained:

“If I teach in Sesotho, my students will understand better. But then when they go to university, everything is in English. Am I helping them or holding them back?”

This dilemma reflects internalised assumptions about linguistic capital and mobility that participants simultaneously critique and reproduce. Participants also noted their own limited academic vocabulary in African languages. Student 9 admitted:

“I speak Setswana at home, but I do not know how to teach History concepts in Setswana. We were never taught this way, so we do not have the language for it.”

This points to the intergenerational effects of linguistic colonialism, where academic discourse has developed almost exclusively in English and Afrikaans. Moreover, resource constraints in distance learning contexts emerged as an additional challenge. Student 1 described:

“I do not have contact with other isiZulu-speaking History students to practice teaching in our language together. Everything in distance learning is individual, and everything is in English.”

This isolation limits opportunities for collaborative development of multilingual pedagogies. Some participants expressed concern about linguistic diversity in classrooms.

Student 8 noted:

"In South Africa, one classroom might have students speaking six different languages. If I teach in my language, what about students who speak other languages? English is the common language everyone understands at least a bit."

This multilingual complexity complicates straightforward solutions and reflects the pragmatic appeal of *lingua francas*.

Despite these challenges, participants resisted defeatism. Student 10 asserted:

"These are real problems, but they are not insurmountable. The Soweto students faced bigger obstacles. If we are committed to decolonization, we must find ways to make it work, not just list reasons why it is difficult."

This determination reflects critical pedagogical praxis, combining realistic assessment with transformative action.

Theme 5: Multilingual pedagogy as decolonial practice

Participants articulated various strategies for implementing multilingual, decolonial History teaching. Student 2 proposed:

"We can teach concepts in English but discuss and debate in home languages. Let students write first drafts in their languages, then translate to English if required. This validates their thinking while meeting institutional requirements."

This approach recognises translanguaging as a pedagogical resource. Other participants advocated for developing curriculum materials in African languages. Student 5 suggested:

"Teachers should work together to create History resources in different languages. It will take time, but it is necessary work. We cannot wait for publishers or government to do it."

This collaborative approach addresses resource scarcity through grassroots knowledge production. Participants also emphasised the importance of incorporating oral history and community knowledge. Student 7 explained:

"In African cultures, history is often passed through oral storytelling. We should bring elders into classrooms to share histories in our languages. This is also decolonizing because it values oral knowledge, not just written texts."

This pedagogical approach challenges colonial privileging of literacy and written documentation. Some participants proposed starting with local histories taught in local languages. Student 3 stated:

"We could begin by teaching community histories in the languages of that community. Students learn to do history in their own language before moving to national or global topics."

This scaffolding strategy builds from familiar content and languages toward more challenging material.

Participants recognised that multilingual pedagogy requires reconceptualising assessment. Student 6 argued:

"We need to assess understanding of History, not English proficiency. Oral presentations, visual projects, dramatizations—these can show knowledge without requiring perfect English."

This challenges the linguistic bias in traditional written examinations.

Several participants connected multilingual pedagogy to broader decolonial goals. Student 4 reflected:

"Using African languages is not just about translation. It changes what knowledge we include, how we discuss it, whose voices we hear. It is about epistemic justice."

This sophisticated understanding positions language as central to transforming knowledge production itself. Participants also saw their role as teacher educators as crucial for systemic change. Student 10 stated:

"When we become teachers, we can teach differently than we were taught. We can show that African languages belong in academic spaces. And when we teach future teachers, we multiply the impact."

This generative vision emphasises teachers as change agents who can influence educational systems across time.

Discussion of findings

The findings reveal complex negotiations of linguistic decolonisation among pre-service History teachers who simultaneously critique colonial language hierarchies and navigate institutional structures that maintain those hierarchies. The discussion that follows

synthesises these findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing scholarship, organised around the central argument that the Soweto Uprising provides a productive historical and pedagogical lens for understanding—and responding to—contemporary language politics in History teacher education.

Language, knowledge, and historical consciousness

Participants' articulation of language as carrying cultural knowledge and shaping identity strongly aligns with postcolonial theory's emphasis on language as epistemologically significant.⁵¹ Their recognition that certain concepts and philosophies are embedded in linguistic structures supports Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that colonial languages alienate colonised peoples from indigenous knowledge systems.⁵² For History Education, this finding is particularly significant: if language shapes historical consciousness—the way people connect past, present, and future—then English-only History instruction does not merely inconvenience multilingual students; it structurally limits the kinds of historical understanding they can develop. The participant who noted that ubuntu philosophy is 'built into' Setswana, demonstrates how languages encode ontological and ethical frameworks that differ from Western paradigms. This finding corroborates research on multilingual education that documents how students' home languages serve as cognitive and affective resources for learning.⁵³ Studies in South African schools show that when learners can engage content in familiar languages, comprehension improves and participation increases.⁵⁴ This study, however, extends existing research by examining how future teachers understand these dynamics. Their meta-awareness suggests they could implement pedagogies that leverage multilingualism rather than treating it as a deficit.

The ambivalence participants expressed about English—simultaneously critiquing its dominance while acknowledging its utility and their own partial identification with it—reflects the hybridity central to postcolonial experience.⁵⁵ This complicates simplistic narratives of language politics that position English purely as a colonial imposition to be rejected. Instead, participants recognise English as both a tool of oppression and a potentially useful resource, embodying what Bhabha calls the "in-between" space of

⁵¹ A Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism...*, pp. 91-96.

⁵² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind...*, pp. 11-15.

⁵³ O García and L Wei, *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁵⁴ L Makalela, "Moving out of linguistic boxes...", *Language and Education*, 29(3), 2015 pp. 210-213

⁵⁵ HK Bhabha, *The location of culture...*, pp. 1-18.

postcolonial identity.⁵⁶ This nuanced perspective is less evident in some decolonisation literature that takes more absolutist positions on colonial languages.

Critical awareness of linguistic colonialism

Participants demonstrated sophisticated analysis of how linguistic hierarchies operate in higher education, identifying contradictions between decolonisation rhetoric and continued English dominance. Their observations about textbooks, assessment, and material resources reveal what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls the “coloniality of knowledge”—the ongoing patterns that privilege Western epistemologies and languages even in nominally decolonised institutions.⁵⁷ In the ODL context, this coloniality is particularly visible: even the history of the Soweto Uprising—a struggle explicitly about language—is accessible to student teachers primarily through English-language sources, as Student 1’s comment about isiZulu sources illustrates.

This critical awareness aligns with Freire’s concept of conscientisation, the process of developing critical consciousness about oppressive structures.⁵⁸ However, the theme of internalised linguistic hierarchies reveals that conscientisation is partial and uneven. Even while intellectually critiquing English hegemony, some participants described feeling that English is “more academic”. The variation in how deeply this internalisation had been worked through—from Student 8’s ongoing self-correction to Student 6’s more resolved counter-hegemonic identity—suggests that teacher education must provide sustained, reflective engagement with language ideology, not only theoretical critique.⁵⁹

Negotiating tensions: Ideals and constraints

The tensions participants identified between decolonial aspirations and practical constraints reflect contradictions within educational systems that are simultaneously sites of domination and potential liberation.⁶⁰ Participants’ concerns about disadvantaging students by teaching in African languages reveal how linguistic colonialism becomes self-perpetuating. Because higher education remains English-dominant, preparing students for university success requires English proficiency, which justifies English-medium

⁵⁶ HK Bhabha, *The location of culture ...*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of power ...*, pp. 23-45.

⁵⁸ P Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed ...*, pp. 79-82.

⁵⁹ F Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 17-40.

⁶⁰ HA Giroux, *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), pp. 108-112.

instruction, which perpetuates English dominance.⁶¹ Freire's concept of praxis⁶²—critical reflection combined with transformative action—is useful here: participants did not simply accept this circular logic, they sought ways to work within and against it. Their strategies, however, are constrained by the ODL environment's individualised structure, which limits the collaborative development of multilingual pedagogies that a community of practice approach might enable.⁶³

The participants' acknowledgment of South Africa's linguistic diversity complicates romanticised notions of simply replacing English with African languages. In multilingual classrooms where students speak different languages, pragmatic questions arise about communication and inclusion. This finding adds nuance to decolonisation debates that sometimes underestimate implementation complexities. It suggests that linguistic decolonisation in South Africa cannot mean reverting to monolingual education, but requires developing truly multilingual pedagogies that honour multiple languages simultaneously.

Multilingual pedagogy as transformative practice

Participants' proposals for multilingual pedagogy demonstrate awareness of translanguaging—using all linguistic resources flexibly rather than keeping languages separate.⁶⁴ Their suggestions to allow discussion in home languages while working toward English academic writing reflects research showing that multilingual pedagogies enhance learning when thoughtfully implemented.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the emphasis on oral history and community knowledge connects linguistic decolonisation to epistemic decolonisation. By validating oral traditions and community expertise, participants challenge colonial privileging of written texts and certified expertise.⁶⁶ This aligns with African philosophy of education that emphasises communal knowledge production and intergenerational transmission.⁶⁷ It also reflects postcolonial theory's critique of Western epistemological dominance and its call to centre indigenous knowledge systems.⁶⁸

⁶¹ The concept of hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci, refers to how dominant groups maintain power through cultural and ideological means rather than force alone, making their domination appear natural and inevitable.

⁶² P Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*..., p. 125.

⁶³ M Priestley, G Biesta and S Robinson, *Teacher agency: An ecological approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶⁴ O García and L Wei, *Translanguaging*..., pp. 21-25.

⁶⁵ L Makalela, "Moving out of linguistic boxes...", *Language and Education*, 2015, pp. 214-215.

⁶⁶ LT Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), pp. 143-161.

⁶⁷ DP Pattenayak, *Multilingualism and mother-tongue education* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶⁸ WD Mignolo, *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Participants' focus on local histories taught in local languages as an entry point for multilingual pedagogy, demonstrates pedagogical wisdom. This approach provides scaffolding—beginning with familiar content in familiar languages before introducing more challenging material. It also addresses the concern that teaching in one African language may exclude speakers of other African languages by starting where linguistic communities align with content.

The recognition that multilingual pedagogy requires reconceptualising assessment is crucial. Research documents how assessment practices often undermine multilingual teaching by requiring demonstration of learning in specific languages.⁶⁹ Participants' suggestions for diverse assessment formats reflect principles of authentic assessment that prioritises understanding over linguistic performance.⁷⁰

Finally, participants' vision of themselves as change agents positions teacher education as critical for systemic transformation. This aligns with scholarship emphasising teachers' potential to serve as organic intellectuals who challenge dominant ideologies and create counter-hegemonic spaces.⁷¹ Distance learning contexts, which educate many teachers for under-resourced schools, may be particularly important sites for cultivating decolonial pedagogies that can reach marginalised communities.

Implications for teacher education

The findings suggest several implications for decolonising teacher education, particularly in distance learning contexts. These implications flow from the article's central argument: that the Soweto Uprising, understood as a historical and pedagogical lens, offers a concrete entry point for History teacher education programmes to engage with language, epistemic justice, and historical consciousness in an integrated and discipline-specific way. First, History teacher education programmes should explicitly use the Soweto Uprising—and comparable cases of language-based educational resistance—as pedagogical cases for developing historical consciousness in relation to contemporary decolonisation. This positions History Education's contribution as unique: not a generic decolonial-language discussion, but one grounded in the discipline's own historiography and methods.

⁶⁹ M Turnbull, S. Lapkin and D. Hart, "Grade 3 immersion students' performance in literacy and mathematics", *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 47(1), 2001, pp. 3-19.

⁷⁰ D Vlachopoulos and A Makri, "A systematic literature review on authentic assessment in higher education: Best practices for the development of 21st century skills, and policy consideration", *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 83, 2024, p. 101425.

⁷¹ HA Giroux, *Teachers as transformative intellectuals*, HA Giroux, *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning* (Granby, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988). pp. 121-128.

Second, ODL programmes should create opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop academic language competencies in African languages. This could include modules taught in African languages, assignments that can be completed in home languages, and collaborative projects developing curriculum materials in multiple languages. Third, distance learning pedagogies must be actively designed for multilingual collaboration, rather than defaulting to the individualised, English-medium model that participants described. Technology enables connections across geographic distance; programmes should leverage this to create virtual communities of practice where multilingual pre-service History teachers collaborate on developing multilingual pedagogical materials, including history resources in African languages.

Fourth, programmes should address internalised linguistic hierarchies through consciousness-raising activities—autobiographical writing about language histories, critical analysis of personal language ideologies, and exposure to examples of African languages used in academic and professional contexts.

Finally, teacher education should emphasise historical consciousness—the ability to connect past struggles to present challenges and future possibilities. The Soweto Uprising offers one powerful historical reference point, however, programmes should explore multiple histories of educational resistance and linguistic activism, both in South Africa and globally.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how pre-service History teachers in South African distance education understand the linguistic dimensions of curriculum decolonisation, drawing on the 1976 Soweto Uprising as a central historical and pedagogical lens. The central argument that has emerged is that the Soweto Uprising is not merely contextual background for a study about language and decolonisation: it is the most powerful historical resource available to South African History Education for teaching students to understand language as a site of political struggle, epistemic justice, and historical agency.

The findings demonstrate that student teachers possess sophisticated, though unevenly developed, critical awareness of linguistic colonialism in higher education while simultaneously navigating practical constraints that complicate decolonial implementation. Language operates simultaneously as a site of colonial power and potential liberation. Participants recognised that African languages carry knowledge systems and philosophies marginalised by English hegemony, yet they also acknowledged the pragmatic challenges

of implementing multilingual pedagogy in contexts structured around English dominance. Their reflections embody the hybridity and ambivalence characteristic of postcolonial experience. Critically, the variation in how deeply this awareness had been developed—from sophisticated critique to unresolved internalised hierarchy—underscores the need for History teacher education programmes to actively cultivate, and not assume, critical language consciousness.

The Soweto Uprising emerged as a productive historical and pedagogical lens through which participants could connect past and present, structure and agency, and historical consciousness and contemporary practice. Their capacity to use it this way demonstrates the discipline-specific contribution that History Education can make to the decolonisation agenda—and it points to the kind of History teaching that pre-service teacher education programmes should be preparing students to enact.

Tensions between decolonial ideals and institutional realities revealed how linguistic colonialism becomes self-perpetuating through structures, resources, and internalised ideologies. However, participants demonstrated agency and creativity in proposing multilingual pedagogical strategies, embodying Freirean praxis. Their suggestions—translanguaging, developing materials collaboratively, incorporating oral history, teaching local content in local languages, and reconceptualising assessment—offer concrete pathways toward linguistic decolonisation in History Education.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. The small sample size and single institutional context limit transferability, though the rich contextual description enables readers to assess relevance to other settings. The reliance on self-reported perspectives means the study cannot speak to actual teaching practices, only stated intentions and beliefs. Future research could include classroom observations of how pre-service teachers implement multilingual pedagogies during teaching practice.

The study focused exclusively on History Education; comparative research across disciplines could reveal how disciplinary cultures shape linguistic decolonisation. Research including faculty perspectives would illuminate institutional constraints and possibilities more fully. Longitudinal research tracking participants into their teaching careers could examine how initial commitments to linguistic decolonisation evolve when confronting classroom realities.

Further research is needed on how the Soweto Uprising and similar historical events can be explicitly integrated into History teacher education curricula as pedagogical cases for language, memory, and epistemic justice. Studies examining how ODL institutions can design multilingual collaborative spaces for History teacher education would also address a significant gap identified in this study.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations emerge for policy and practice.

Government and institutional leaders must recognise that linguistic decolonisation requires sustained investment, not just policy documents. Funding should support curriculum development, learning materials production, faculty training, and research on multilingual pedagogy. Policies should create incentives rather than barriers for multilingual teaching.

History teacher education programmes specifically should: (1) integrate the Soweto Uprising and other historical cases of language-based educational resistance as discipline-specific entry points for decolonial pedagogy; (2) create structured opportunities for developing academic literacy in African languages; (3) design collaborative ODL activities that enable multilingual communities of practice among pre-service History teachers; and (4) revise assessment practices to allow demonstration of historical understanding through multiple languages and modalities.

In terms of practice, educators can begin implementing multilingual practices even within constraining systems by allowing home language discussions, incorporating oral history, validating translanguaging, and diversifying assessment. Teachers should connect with colleagues to share resources and strategies, building communities of practice around linguistic decolonisation.