

# The Expanding Use of the English Language for Research and its Implications for Higher Education Institutions and Researchers: A Case Study of Three African Flagship Universities

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## Introduction

The knowledge era has made universities one of the central institutions for the production of new knowledge (Altbach 2009; Douglass 2016; Salmi 2009). In line with this development, many African universities, that were often regarded as teaching-learning laden, (Atuahene 2011; Mavhunga 2017), are now reorienting their missions to embrace research intensiveness as one of their aspirations. This research focuses on the use of the English language for research in selected African flagship universities in Ethiopia, Mozambique and South Africa. The research is conducted against a backdrop where questions related to research productivity are becoming more central not only to higher education institutions but to higher education research pertaining to the continent (see Andoh 2017, Atuahene 2011; Cloete, Bunting, and Maassen 2015; van Schalkwyk and Cloete 2019).

## Problem Statement

Language as a means of communication and organizing thought is an essential aspect of the quality of education and the production and archiving of knowledge (Brumfit 2004; Teferra 2003). Underscoring the need for establishing a research language in higher education, Absalom (2004, 123) states "Without language/s, education could not exist." In the contemporary world of globalization and internationalization of higher education and that of the knowledge economy, studying aspects related to language could also be deemed of paramount significance since these developments are highly language-intensive activities (Saarinen 2017). In the multicultural and multilingual African contexts, questions are being raised in recent scholarship about indigenizing and Africanizing knowledge and 'the language question' raised in this research has added relevance (Alexander 2003; Mazrui 2003; Mbembe 2016).

As indicated in the introductory section, this research mainly focuses on the role that the English language plays as a medium of research for two main reasons. Firstly, among the three functions of language in higher education (i.e., language as a medium for teaching and learning, as a means of research and archiving knowledge, and as an object of theoretical study according to Brumfit's (2004) typology), it is worth noting that the role that the English language plays as a medium of research has not been prominent in comparative and international higher education research. Stressing the need for more investigations into the implications of using the language for research, Kuteeva and Mauranen (2014, 1) state that this particular function of the language is 'a surprisingly under-explored' topic.

The second reason for conducting this study is related to the observation that the lack of scholarly engagement on the topic seems to be even more pronounced in African contexts. Literature on language in African higher education settings manifests an overwhelming focus on approaching language from a teaching and learning vantage point (see for example Alexander 2003; Bamgbose 2004; Bogale 2009; Brock-Utne 2002; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004;

Mazrui 2003; Negash 2011; Rubagumya 1991; Webb 2006) rendering this research-function focused take on English language a relatively unexplored terrain. In line with the argument made by Teferra (2003), this research is, therefore, an attempt to bring what Mazrui (2003) phrased as the 'language question' to the forefront of discussions related to intellectual production on the African continent. Teferra (2003) argues that exploring the implications of using European languages such as English in African higher education is 'one of those hidden yet subversive' elements in the continent's higher education systems, and should be studied, problematized upgraded as one of the significant variables having possible implications for quality of education and research.

## Research Questions

The main research question of the study, therefore, is: *What are the implications of the expanding use of English for research in the selected African flagship universities?*

The specific research questions are:

- What would the expanding use of the language for research in the contexts being studied mean in terms of quality, quantity and relevance of research produced?
- What are (if any) the implications of the current distribution of English language capital on other forms of research-related economic and social capital?
- What would the increasing use of English in African higher education systems mean for rethinking higher education through initiatives such as Africanizing and decolonizing research?

## Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's theory of capital, primarily cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991), and theories on language and decolonization are used to inform the research. The conceptualization and interplay between these perspectives is expected to give a more comprehensive analysis for understanding the implications of the role that the English language plays in promoting or hampering research productivity in the selected flagship universities. This research will try to take a language perspective on decolonizing research capitalizing on the works of scholars such as (Alexander 2003, 2000; Fanon 1963; Hountondji 1995, 2005; Mazrui 2003; Mbembe 2016; Wa Thiongo 1986). In doing so, however, an attempt to come up with a more nuanced analysis of English in African higher education as it will be made considering both colonial legacies and contemporary socio-political and cultural contextual issues as Pennycook (2000) underscores.

## Methodology

To address these research questions, an in-depth interview-based multiple-case study research design is adopted consulting the works of (e.g. Gerring 2006; Stake 2013; Yin 2014). Based on Creswell (2007), the researcher selected the case study universities due to the quality of the sites in informing an understanding of the phenomenon the research questions are trying to address. As the research focuses on responding to the questions from the perspective of university leaders and researchers in the selected universities, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques are used to recruit participants for the study. The university leaders are purposefully selected considering their roles and responsibilities and participation in designing and implementing strategies and policies concerning research and language policy and planning. Based on the Biglan (1973) model of disciplinary classifications the researches that are included in the study are selected from hard and soft sciences. This approach is preferred over a

more convenient snowball sampling, for as Kuteeva and Airey (2014) argue there might be disciplinary dimensions to the choice of English as a medium of research.

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