https://doi.org/10.51483/IJLC.5.2.2025.61-72 ISSN: 2788-404X

SvedbergOpen
DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

International Journal of Languages and Culture

Publisher's Home Page: https://www.svedbergopen.com/

Research Paper Open Access

Transformative Leadership and the Implementation of Decolonised Language Pedagogies in Higher Education

Matodzi G. Sikhwari[1*] and Thivhavhudzi M. Badugela[2]

[1]Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Venda, Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa. E-mail: matodzi.sikhwari@univen.ac.za

[2]Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Educational Studies, University of Venda, Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa. E-mail: thivhavhudzi.badugela@univen.ac.za

Article Info

Volume 5, Issue 2, December 2025
Received : 11 July 2025
Accepted : 21 November 2025
Published : 25 December 2025
doi: 10.51483/IJLC.5.2.2025.61-72

Abstract

The transformation of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa requires the decolonisation of language pedagogies and leadership capable of driving this shift. Many universities still rely on Eurocentric language models that marginalise indigenous languages and reinforce epistemic injustices. This study examines the influence of transformative leadership on the adoption of decolonized language pedagogies in higher education institutions in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using a critical interpretivist paradigm and qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Participants included 18 purposefully selected university language lecturers and academic leaders from public universities in the province. Thematic analysis guided data interpretation, while trustworthiness was ensured through the evaluation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality, and obtaining ethical clearance. Findings suggest that transformative leadership is crucial for overcoming institutional resistance and promoting inclusive language policies. However, the implementation of declonised pedagogies is often hindered by insufficient institutional support and the absence of clear strategic plans. The study recommends that universities develop explicit policies that integrate indigenous languages into teaching and learning and introduce leadership development programs that equip academic leaders to champion decolonised approaches. Overall, the study confirms that transformative leadership serves as a catalyst for meaningful pedagogical change in South African higher education.

Keywords: *Transformative leadership, Decolonisation, Language pedagogy, Higher education, Indigenous languages*

© 2025 Matodzi G. Sikhwari and Thivhavhudzi M. Badugela. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

Post-apartheid South Africa's higher education system remains deeply influenced by colonial legacies, particularly in

* *Corresponding author: Matodzi G. Sikhwari, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Venda, Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa. E-mail: matodzi.sikhwari@univen.ac.za*

2788-404X/© 2025. Matodzi G. Sikhwari and Thivhavhudzi M. Badugela. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

the domain of language pedagogy. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a bearer of culture, identity, and epistemology. Despite numerous transformation initiatives, most universities continue to privilege Eurocentric linguistic models, primarily English, while marginalising indigenous languages. This perpetuates epistemic injustice and limits students' access to knowledge that resonates with their cultural realities. Consequently, the call for the decolonisation of curricula and language practices has become central to the transformation agenda in higher education (Munyai and Phooko, 2021; De Vos and Riedel, 2023).

The background of this challenge lies in the historical privileging of European languages, which has systematically undermined African languages and indigenous knowledge systems. While policies supporting multilingualism exist, their practical implementation remains weak and inconsistent. This dissonance between policy and practice points to a systemic problem, one that cannot be solved by policy frameworks alone but requires transformative leadership capable of challenging entrenched institutional cultures, mobilising stakeholders, and creating enabling conditions for decolonial pedagogies. Transformative leadership, which promotes equity, inclusion, and social justice, is therefore critical in dismantling structural barriers and advancing linguistic diversity in higher education (Universities South Africa, 2022).

However, the problem persists: although the decolonisation discourse is well-established, the actual integration of indigenous languages into teaching and learning remains minimal. Institutional resistance, lack of policy clarity, and insufficient leadership commitment have hindered meaningful change. Without strong leadership to champion and implement inclusive pedagogies, the vision of epistemic justice will remain aspirational rather than practical (Higher Education Leadership Responses, 2021).

This study aims to explore the role of transformative leadership in implementing decolonised language pedagogies within South African higher education institutions. To achieve this aim, the article is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is transformative leadership understood and practiced in higher education?
2. What are the current pedagogical approaches to language teaching in universities?
3. What challenges hinder the implementation of decolonised language pedagogies?
4. What strategies can be employed to promote inclusive and decolonised language instruction?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Transformative Leadership Theory, which emphasises ethical, inclusive, and visionary leadership that actively seeks to challenge social inequities, promote systemic change, and empower communities (Shields, 2010). Transformative leadership goes beyond managerial functions or procedural oversight; it is concerned with inspiring collective action, questioning entrenched practices, and fostering environments where all stakeholders, students, academic staff, and communities can engage in meaningful knowledge production. In the context of higher education, transformative leaders are pivotal in challenging the dominance of Eurocentric pedagogical models and creating spaces for decolonised curricula that foreground indigenous languages and knowledge systems (Zembylas, 2018; De Vos and Riedel, 2023).

Transformative Leadership Theory is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a conceptual lens through which to examine the intersection between leadership practices and educational transformation. South African universities operate within historically entrenched hierarchies that often resist radical pedagogical change. Leaders who adopt transformative approaches can navigate these complex institutional structures by advocating for policies that support linguistic diversity, mediating conflicts, and mobilising academic staff to adopt decolonised teaching strategies. By focusing on leadership as both an enabling and constraining factor, the theory allows this study to explore not only how leaders facilitate change but also how institutional cultures and resistance impact the implementation of decolonised language pedagogies (Collett *et al.*, 2022).

Transformative Leadership Theory also aligns with the study's focus on social justice and equity in higher education. The marginalisation of indigenous languages in curricula is not simply a pedagogical issue; it reflects broader epistemic and cultural inequalities. Transformative leaders are uniquely positioned to confront these inequities by championing inclusive practices, supporting curriculum development that reflects African epistemologies, and fostering institutional accountability. The theory provides analytical tools to examine how leadership behaviors, decision-making processes,

and policy enforcement contribute to or impede the adoption of decolonised language pedagogies (Munyai and Phooko, 2021).

In applying this framework, the study investigates the perceptions, practices, and strategies of academic leaders and lecturers within selected higher education institutions. Transformative Leadership Theory enables the researcher to understand how leadership can act as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation, overcome institutional inertia, and promote inclusive learning environments where indigenous languages and knowledge systems are valued. It also facilitates an exploration of the challenges leaders face, such as resistance from staff, lack of resources, and limited policy clarity, and how they navigate these barriers to effect meaningful change. By using this theory, the study situates leadership at the heart of the decolonisation discourse, highlighting its central role in reshaping language pedagogy in post-apartheid South African higher education.

Therefore, Transformative Leadership Theory is necessary for this study because it provides a structured framework to understand the interplay between leadership practices and the implementation of decolonised pedagogies. It situates leadership as both a guiding force and a potential barrier to change, offering critical insights into how higher education institutions can advance linguistic justice and epistemic equity. The theory's emphasis on ethical, inclusive, and visionary leadership makes it particularly suitable for examining the role of academic leaders in promoting transformative language teaching practices in South Africa.

3. Conceptualising Decolonised Language Pedagogy

Decolonised language pedagogy is an educational approach that seeks to challenge and dismantle the colonial structures embedded within language teaching and learning. In the context of South African higher education, this pedagogy aims to elevate indigenous languages, knowledge systems, and cultural practices that have historically been marginalised under colonial and apartheid regimes.

Central to decolonised language pedagogy is the recognition that language is not merely a tool for communication but a vessel of culture, identity, and epistemology. As argued by De Vos and Riedel (2023), the dominance of European languages in South African curricula has perpetuated epistemic injustice by sidelining African languages and the indigenous knowledge they carry. This marginalisation limits students' access to knowledge that resonates with their cultural realities, thereby hindering their full participation in academic and societal discourses.

Transformative leadership plays a pivotal role in the implementation of decolonised language pedagogies. Such leadership is characterised by a commitment to equity, social justice, and the active challenging of existing power structures within educational institutions. In the South African context, transformative leaders are tasked with navigating the complexities of institutional resistance, policy ambiguities, and resource constraints to foster environments conducive to the inclusion of indigenous languages in teaching and learning.

The integration of indigenous languages into curricula is not merely a linguistic concern but a broader epistemological shift. It involves reimagining what knowledge is valued and how it is transmitted. This reimagining aligns with the decolonisation agenda, which seeks to disrupt the hegemony of Western epistemologies and promote a more inclusive and representative educational framework (Hardman, 2024).

However, the path towards decolonised language pedagogy is fraught with challenges. Institutional resistance, lack of policy clarity, and insufficient leadership commitment often impede the meaningful integration of indigenous languages into higher education. As noted by De Vos and Riedel (2023), while there have been efforts to transform curricula, the representativity of languages and theoretical approaches remains an area requiring further attention.

Conceptualising decolonised language pedagogy requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses linguistic inclusivity, epistemological diversification, and transformative leadership. It necessitates a concerted effort to challenge entrenched colonial legacies and create educational spaces where indigenous languages and knowledge systems are not only acknowledged but are integral to the learning experience.

4. Literature Review

The literature on transformative leadership and decolonised language pedagogies highlights the persistent influence of colonial legacies in higher education and the critical role of leadership in driving epistemic and linguistic inclusion. It

examines how policies, institutional practices, and pedagogical strategies intersect to either enable or hinder the meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge systems.

4.1. Colonial Legacy in Language Education

South Africa's higher education system remains heavily influenced by colonial and apartheid-era structures that prioritised European language, primarily English and Afrikaans. Despite the post-apartheid transformation agenda, these languages continue to dominate institutional policies, curricula, and assessment practices, often marginalising indigenous African languages This historical privileging has perpetuated linguistic hierarchies that reinforce social and epistemic inequalities, undermining students' cultural identity and access to knowledge that aligns with their lived experiences.

Studies have shown that students who are taught primarily in English face significant barriers to fully understanding content and participating in academic discourse, creating a mismatch between their linguistic competencies and institutional expectations. This mismatch is particularly evident in rural and historically disadvantaged contexts, where learners' primary languages are often African languages. Consequently, language policy and pedagogy that neglect indigenous languages reinforce epistemic exclusion and limit cognitive engagement (De Vos and Riedel, 2023).

The colonial legacy also manifests in the curriculum design, which reflects Eurocentric epistemologies and often disregards African knowledge systems, cultural practices, and oral traditions. This marginalisation diminishes the epistemic legitimacy of African languages, making it difficult for students to see themselves reflected in academic content (Hardman, 2024). Transforming language education, therefore, requires more than policy reform; it necessitates a critical interrogation of the entrenched colonial mindset within higher education institutions.

Efforts to address these legacies have included multilingualism policies and decolonisation initiatives. However, these measures often face inconsistent implementation due to weak institutional commitment, lack of resources, and resistance from faculty accustomed to Eurocentric teaching approaches (Makhanya and Zibane, 2020). Addressing the colonial legacy in language education requires not only recognition of historical injustices but also the adoption of inclusive pedagogical practices that legitimise and valorise indigenous languages within higher education settings.

4.2. The Role of Language in Epistemic Access

Language is a primary medium through which knowledge is accessed, interpreted, and transmitted. In higher education, the language of instruction profoundly influences learners' comprehension, engagement, and ability to participate meaningfully in academic activities (Mulaudzi, 2024). Epistemic access, therefore, depends on aligning language pedagogy with students' linguistic competencies and cultural context. When students are compelled to learn in languages in which they are not fully proficient, they may experience cognitive overload, reduced comprehension, and disengagement, ultimately affecting their academic performance (Edu Sci. 2024).

Indigenous languages play a crucial role in fostering epistemic access because they carry culturally embedded knowledge, worldviews, and cognitive frameworks that students understand intuitively. Incorporating these languages into teaching can improve comprehension and facilitate critical thinking, as learners are able to connect new concepts with familiar linguistic and cultural structures (Mlambo and Matfunjwa, 2024). Research also indicates that epistemic inclusion contributes to a sense of belonging, identity affirmation, and increased academic motivation among students from marginalized linguistic backgrounds (Shange, 2023).

Despite these benefits, institutional practices often privilege dominant European languages, creating epistemic barriers for many students. Universities that fail to integrate indigenous languages into teaching, learning, and assessment inadvertently perpetuate inequities, limiting students' opportunities to engage with knowledge fully and on their own terms (De Vos and Riedel, 2023). Transformative leadership can mitigate these barriers by advocating for inclusive language policies and supporting the integration of multilingual pedagogical practices that enhance epistemic access.

Language is not merely a conduit for content but a critical determinant of epistemic participation. Recognising and implementing decolonised language pedagogies is therefore essential for equitable access to knowledge, academic success, and the promotion of social justice in higher education.

4.3. Transformative Leadership in Educational Change

Transformative leadership has emerged as a key driver in reshaping higher education to promote equity, inclusion, and social justice. This leadership approach challenges entrenched hierarchies, advocates for systemic change, and seeks

to create institutional environments that support diverse knowledge systems, including indigenous languages (Shields, 2020). In the context of language decolonisation, transformative leaders are critical in navigating institutional resistance, mobilising stakeholders, and establishing policies that enable the adoption of inclusive pedagogical practices (De Vos and Riedel, 2023).

Effective transformative leadership involves vision, ethical grounding, and collaborative engagement with both staff and students. Leaders must critically interrogate existing curricula, policies, and practices to identify colonial legacies and implement strategies that advance linguistic and epistemic justice (De Vos and Riedel, 2023). Furthermore, research suggests that leadership development programs focusing on decolonial pedagogies empower academic leaders to champion indigenous languages, support lecturer training, and monitor implementation progress (Hardman, 2024).

Transformative leadership also plays a mediating role in addressing structural and cultural barriers. Institutional resistance, lack of resources, and limited policy enforcement often undermine decolonisation efforts. Leaders who actively promote dialogue, mentorship, and grassroots innovation can foster an environment where decolonised language pedagogies are valued and sustainably integrated into teaching and learning (Makhanya and Zibane, 2020). Such leadership ensures that decolonial initiatives are not superficial but embedded in institutional culture and practice.

Transformative leadership is not optional but essential for the effective implementation of decolonised language pedagogies. By challenging the status quo, promoting inclusion, and driving systemic change, transformative leaders enable higher education institutions to move beyond symbolic decolonisation towards meaningful and sustainable educational transformation.

4.4. Decolonial Pedagogies in Higher Education

Decolonial pedagogies in higher education aim to challenge Eurocentric knowledge systems and foreground indigenous languages, epistemologies, and cultural practices. These pedagogies advocate for curricula that reflect the histories, experiences, and knowledge of historically marginalised groups, thereby promoting epistemic justice and cognitive inclusivity (Mahlangu and Maseko, 2021). In South Africa, this approach is seen as a critical step toward genuine transformation of universities, addressing the lingering colonial influence in teaching, assessment, and research practices.

Implementing decolonial pedagogies involves rethinking the content, methods, and assessment strategies employed in higher education. This includes integrating indigenous texts, local languages, and culturally relevant case studies into curricula, as well as fostering participatory and dialogical classroom practices (Van Wyk and Mbatha, 2022). By doing so, students are not only exposed to alternative knowledge systems but are also empowered to critically engage with dominant epistemologies, thus bridging the gap between formal education and students' lived experiences.

Globally, decolonial pedagogical frameworks have been linked to improved student engagement and academic performance, particularly among learners from marginalised linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Smith and Coetzee, 2020). Within South African higher education, studies highlight the importance of leadership support, institutional policy, and resource allocation in successfully implementing decolonial practices (Hardman, 2024). Without such enabling factors, initiatives often remain symbolic rather than substantive, limiting their transformative potential.

Decolonial pedagogies foster intercultural dialogue and critical consciousness among both students and educators. They encourage reflexivity, prompting educators to examine their own biases and assumptions while developing teaching strategies that are inclusive and socially responsive (Mahlangu and Maseko, 2021). Transformative leadership is thus closely linked with the success of decolonial pedagogies, as leaders play a pivotal role in providing direction, support, and accountability for embedding these practices institutionally.

4.5. Barriers to Implementation

Despite growing recognition of the importance of decolonial pedagogies, several barriers impede their effective implementation in higher education. Institutional resistance remains a significant challenge, as entrenched hierarchies, Eurocentric norms, and faculty attitudes often oppose systemic change (De Vos and Riedel, 2023) Resistance may manifest as reluctance to adopt indigenous language instruction, dismissive attitudes toward non-Western knowledge systems, or superficial compliance with decolonisation policies without genuine commitment.

Another major barrier is the lack of clear policy frameworks and strategic plans to guide the integration of indigenous languages and decolonial content into curricula. While multilingualism and decolonisation policies exist at many South

African universities, their operationalisation is often inconsistent and poorly monitored (De Vos and Riedel, 2023). This disconnect between policy and practice contributes to uneven implementation, where certain departments or courses embrace decolonial approaches, while others maintain Eurocentric norms.

Resource constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Developing teaching materials in indigenous languages, training lecturers in decolonial pedagogies, and providing institutional support for inclusive teaching practices require funding, infrastructure, and continuous professional development (Mpanza, 2023). Without adequate investment, decolonial initiatives risk being sporadic or unsustainable, limiting their potential impact.

Leadership commitment is crucial to overcoming these barriers. Transformative leadership can mitigate institutional resistance and mobilise resources by championing inclusive policies, supporting faculty development, and fostering a culture that values linguistic and epistemic diversity (Shields, 2020). Conversely, weak or indifferent leadership often results in stalled initiatives and minimal change, reinforcing the status quo. Addressing these barriers requires a coordinated approach that combines leadership, policy enforcement, resource allocation, and ongoing evaluation to ensure the meaningful integration of decolonial language pedagogies in higher education.

The literature underscores that transformative leadership is pivotal for overcoming institutional resistance, supporting inclusive policies, and fostering the adoption of decolonial pedagogies. Successful implementation of these approaches requires coordinated efforts across leadership, policy, pedagogy, and resource allocation to achieve genuine academic transformation.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach within a critical interpretivist paradigm to explore how transformative leadership influences the implementation of decolonised language pedagogies in higher education. A case study design was employed, focusing on selected public universities in the Limpopo Province, which allowed for an in-depth investigation of the experiences and perspectives of academic leaders and language lecturers (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2019). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided rich, contextualised insights into participants' understanding of transformative leadership and its practical application in promoting decolonial pedagogical practices. In addition, document analysis of institutional policies and curriculum frameworks was conducted to triangulate the findings and contextualise participants' responses within formal institutional structures (Flick, 2021).

The population comprised academic leaders and language educators who are directly involved in curriculum development and teaching practices in higher education. Purposive sampling was applied to select 18 participants who had relevant experience and knowledge regarding leadership and language pedagogy in their institutions. This sampling technique ensured that participants could provide meaningful insights into the interplay between leadership approaches and the implementation of decolonised language instruction (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data systematically, enabling the identification of recurrent patterns, themes, and relationships that reflect the challenges, strategies, and successes of transformative leadership in this context.

Trustworthiness was ensured through strategies such as member checking, thick descriptions, and peer debriefing to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional ethical clearance, were strictly observed to protect participants and uphold research integrity. Therefore, this methodological approach was suitable for addressing the study's aim and research questions because it allowed for a nuanced exploration of complex social phenomena, capturing both individual experiences and institutional realities (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Flick, 2021; Merriam and Tisdell, 2019).

6. Findings and Discussion

The presentation of findings and discussion highlights the key insights regarding how transformative leadership influences the implementation of decolonised language pedagogies in higher education. This section analyses participants' perspectives and institutional contexts to illuminate the interplay between leadership, policy, and pedagogical innovation.

6.1. Theme 1: Institutional Resistance to Decolonisation

The study revealed that institutional resistance constitutes one of the most significant barriers to implementing decolonised language pedagogies in higher education. Academic leaders highlighted that entrenched attitudes among

staff and long-standing adherence to Eurocentric teaching models hinder the integration of indigenous languages into the curriculum. Many lecturers remain comfortable using English as the primary medium of instruction, partly because it aligns with their professional training and prior teaching experiences. One participant remarked,

> *"Many lecturers feel more comfortable teaching in English because that is what they know best. Introducing indigenous languages challenges their usual practices, and some resist change" (Participant 7, Academic Leader).*

This finding aligns with Chikoko (2021), who assert that resistance often originates from institutional culture and the perceived threat to professional identity. Mkhize (2022) similarly notes that entrenched colonial legacies create systemic inertia, slowing the adoption of inclusive pedagogical approaches.

The resistance observed in the study is not confined to individual attitudes; it is also embedded in institutional practices and structures. Policies and historical frameworks often prioritise Western languages, inadvertently creating obstacles for indigenous language inclusion. One lecturer highlighted:

> *"Even when there are policies supporting multilingualism, the implementation is weak because there is little enforcement or follow-up from management" (Participant 12, Language Lecturer).*

This observation reflects Heleta and Dilraj (2024) argument that policy statements alone are insufficient to drive meaningful change; without active leadership and accountability mechanisms, decolonisation efforts remain largely symbolic.

Institutional resistance also manifests in subtle, cultural forms. Faculty members who feel threatened by changes in language pedagogy may question the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge or undervalue its role in higher education. Participants explained that such resistance often leads to reluctance in curriculum innovation and limits the willingness of staff to experiment with new teaching methods. Transformative leadership, therefore, becomes pivotal, as it encourages leaders to model change, confront resistance proactively, and cultivate a supportive environment for linguistic diversity (Shields, 2010).

Participants further emphasized that confronting resistance requires more than policy enforcement; it demands ongoing dialogue, mentoring, and capacity-building initiatives.

> *"When lecturers are included in discussions about curriculum transformation and receive support to implement indigenous languages, resistance decreases, and buy-in improves" (Participant 5, Academic Leader).*

The study highlights that institutional resistance is both cultural and structural, and overcoming it necessitates visionary leadership that can challenge the status quo while fostering an inclusive academic culture. In essence, transformative leadership acts as a catalyst, encouraging institutions to reconcile historical legacies with contemporary demands for linguistic and epistemic justice.

6.2. Theme 2: Limited Policy and Curriculum Support

Another major theme emerging from the study is the inadequacy of policy and curriculum frameworks to effectively support decolonised language teaching. Participants reported that although universities often issue statements endorsing multilingualism and decolonisation, the practical strategies and resources needed to implement these policies are largely absent. One lecturer explained:

> *"Our institution talks about decolonisation, but when it comes to curriculum development and teaching materials in indigenous languages, there is almost nothing in place" (Participant 3, Language Lecturer).*

This observation echoes the findings of Nkomo and Ngwenya (2020), who argue that policy pronouncements without operational support fail to effect systemic change in higher education institutions.

The lack of curriculum support results in inconsistencies across teaching practices. Academic leaders indicated that the absence of clear guidelines for integrating indigenous languages into courses leaves lecturers to navigate the process individually, creating disparities in instructional quality. One participant stated:

> *"There is no clear guideline on how to integrate Tshivenda or other local languages into our courses. Lecturers are left to their own devices, and this affects the quality and consistency of instruction" (Participant 15, Academic Leader).*

Kazeroony and Du Plessis (2022) similarly observe that gaps in curriculum support and institutional oversight hinder the successful implementation of decolonial pedagogies.

Limited policy and curriculum support also affects assessment practices. Participants noted that the absence of resources and teaching materials in indigenous languages complicates the development of inclusive assessments. Some lecturers reported difficulties in designing assignments that adequately reflect indigenous epistemologies, while students often struggle to engage meaningfully with the content due to inconsistent language integration. The study underscores that systemic barriers, such as weak enforcement of policy, insufficient training, and lack of materials, cannot be addressed solely at the individual lecturer level; institutional leadership must intervene.

Transformative leadership plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation. Leaders can mobilize resources, clarify expectations, and foster collective responsibility for curriculum transformation (Shields, 2010). Participants emphasized that strong leadership involves providing professional development opportunities, mentoring staff, and establishing accountability structures to ensure that policies translate into meaningful action. As one participant reflected,

> *"With the right support and clear guidance from leadership, lecturers feel empowered to incorporate indigenous languages and knowledge into their teaching, which significantly improves curriculum relevance" (Participant 10, Academic Leader).*

The theme highlights that policy and curriculum limitations represent structural challenges that require proactive leadership and strategic planning. Without these interventions, efforts to decolonise language pedagogy remain fragmented and ineffective. Transformative leadership is thus essential in aligning policy with practice, ensuring that institutional commitments to multilingualism and epistemic justice are realized in everyday teaching and learning activities.

6.3. Theme 3: Leadership as a Catalyst for Change

The study found that transformative leadership serves as a crucial catalyst in promoting the adoption of decolonised language pedagogies. Participants emphasized that leaders who demonstrate vision, ethical commitment, and inclusive decision-making significantly influence the integration of indigenous languages into higher education curricula. One academic leader explained,

> "*When leadership visibly supports decolonisation initiatives and models inclusive teaching practices, staff are more willing to follow suit. Leadership sets the tone for the entire institution" (Participant 2, Academic Leader).*

This aligns with Shields (2010), who argues that transformative leaders inspire change by challenging entrenched norms and fostering an institutional culture that values equity and inclusion.

Participants further noted that leadership impacts not only attitudes but also practical implementation. Leaders who actively facilitate curriculum reform, provide resources, and advocate for staff development create conditions conducive to meaningful change.

> *"Our dean has been instrumental in creating workshops for lecturers on integrating indigenous knowledge into courses. This practical support makes it easier for us to adopt new pedagogical approaches" (Participant 8, Language Lecturer).*

Similarly, Kazeroony and Du Plessis (2022) contend that leadership commitment and support are essential for overcoming structural and cultural barriers in universities, particularly in contexts where Eurocentric teaching models are deeply entrenched.

Transformative leadership also entails confronting resistance strategically. Several participants reported that leaders who engage resistant staff in dialogue, provide mentorship, and recognize efforts to implement indigenous language teaching reduce opposition and enhance buy-in.

> *"Leaders who listen, provide guidance, and reward innovative practices make a significant difference. It's not enough to issue directives; support must be continuous and visible" (Participant 6, Academic Leader).*

This approach reflects Heleta's (2019) findings that sustained leadership engagement is necessary to translate decolonisation policies into practical actions and to cultivate a shared vision among staff.

Participants highlighted that leadership influences institutional priorities, including resource allocation and policy enforcement. Leaders who champion decolonised language pedagogies ensure that sufficient funds, teaching materials, and professional development opportunities are made available.

"Our vice-chancellor allocated funding specifically for producing Tshivenda teaching materials, which has been a game-changer. Without this leadership intervention, progress would have been slow" (Participant 11, Academic Leader).

This observation reinforces Shields' (2010) argument that transformative leaders not only inspire change but also operationalize it through strategic decision-making and resource mobilisation.

Leadership emerges as a pivotal factor in enabling systemic change within higher education. Transformative leaders act as change agents who model inclusive practices, mitigate resistance, and mobilize institutional resources to support decolonised language pedagogy. The study underscores that without proactive and visionary leadership, efforts to decolonise curricula and teaching practices are likely to remain sporadic and ineffective.

6.4. Theme 4: Grassroots Innovation in Pedagogy

The fourth theme highlights the role of grassroots innovation among lecturers in advancing decolonised language pedagogies, even in the face of limited institutional support. Participants reported that many educators, motivated by a commitment to cultural relevance and epistemic justice, have developed creative strategies to incorporate indigenous languages and knowledge into their teaching. One lecturer shared,

"Even though formal policies and resources are lacking, I've started using Tshivenda texts and local narratives in my lessons. Students engage more deeply when content reflects their lived experiences" (Participant 4, Language Lecturer).

This finding aligns with Chikoko (2021), who emphasize that lecturers' agency and creativity are crucial drivers of decolonial pedagogy when institutional structures are insufficient.

Participants also highlighted innovative approaches to curriculum design and assessment. Some lecturers integrate oral storytelling, local proverbs, and indigenous literature to contextualize theoretical concepts, while others collaborate with community knowledge holders to enrich the learning experience.

"I partnered with elders in the community to bring Tshivenda oral literature into the classroom. Students are more motivated and understand concepts better when they see the relevance to their own culture" (Participant 9, Language Lecturer).

This reflects the argument by Nkomo and Ngwenya (2020) that locally grounded pedagogical innovations enhance epistemic access and reinforce cultural identity in higher education contexts.

Grassroots innovation often involves peer collaboration and informal networks. Lecturers share materials, strategies, and experiences to compensate for the lack of formal guidance or institutional resources. One participant noted,

"We have an informal group where we discuss ways to include indigenous languages in our modules. Sharing ideas has helped us overcome some of the practical challenges of decolonising our teaching" (Participant 14, Language Lecturer).

This practice aligns with Chikoko's (2021) observation that bottom-up initiatives are essential in contexts where institutional support is weak, as they foster a culture of experimentation and collective problem-solving.

Despite these positive developments, participants also acknowledged challenges. Grassroots innovation requires significant effort, time, and commitment, and educators often face resistance from colleagues or students accustomed to English-only instruction. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that lecturers' agency, creativity, and commitment to culturally responsive teaching play a crucial role in sustaining decolonial pedagogical practices. Transformative leadership can amplify these efforts by recognising, supporting, and scaling successful grassroots initiatives (Shields, 2010).

Grassroots innovation represents a critical mechanism through which decolonised language pedagogies are realized in practice. While institutional barriers remain, the dedication and creativity of lecturers demonstrate that meaningful change is possible. Combined with transformative leadership, these bottom-up initiatives can foster a sustainable and culturally relevant learning environment, promoting linguistic diversity and epistemic justice in higher education.

The findings demonstrate that transformative leadership is crucial for overcoming resistance, enabling policy support, and fostering innovative pedagogical practices. Overall, effective leadership acts as both a catalyst and enabler in advancing decolonised and inclusive language teaching in higher education.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends that higher education institutions adopt comprehensive and enforceable policies that prioritise the inclusion of indigenous languages in teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Leadership development programmes should be implemented to equip academic leaders with the necessary knowledge, skills, and decolonial frameworks to champion language transformation initiatives effectively. Collaborative partnerships between universities, local communities, and indigenous knowledge holders should be strengthened to ensure culturally relevant curricula and teaching materials. Institutions are also urged to allocate dedicated funding and resources to support the development and dissemination of textbooks, digital content, and other instructional materials in African languages. Additionally, integrating decolonial pedagogical training into lecturer induction and continuous professional development programmes can empower educators to implement inclusive, culturally responsive teaching approaches. By fostering an enabling environment that combines policy, leadership, and capacity building, institutions can create sustainable pathways for the decolonisation of language pedagogies. These strategic measures collectively support transformative leadership in advancing equity, linguistic justice, and epistemic diversity in higher education.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that transformative leadership plays a pivotal role in facilitating the implementation of decolonised language pedagogies in higher education. Effective leaders can overcome institutional resistance, advocate for inclusive policies, and inspire innovative teaching practices that foreground indigenous knowledge systems. Despite the persistence of structural and cultural barriers, visionary leadership enables universities to create supportive environments that validate African languages and epistemologies. Advancing decolonised pedagogy requires strategic leadership, collaborative engagement, and sustained institutional commitment to challenge entrenched Eurocentric practices. Ultimately, transformative leadership acts as a catalyst for meaningful educational change, fostering linguistic equity, cultural relevance, and social justice within South African higher education.

References

Chikoko, V. (2021). Re-Visiting the Decolonising of South African Higher Education Question: A Systematic Literature Review. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(1), 21-36. https://doi.org/10.20853/35-1-4420.

Collett, P., Dison, L. and Du Plooy, L. (2022). In Pursuit of Social Justice in South African Higher Education: Exploring the Relationship between Epistemological Access and the Development of Students' Academic Literacies. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(4), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-4-5050

Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th Edition, Sage Publications.

De Vos, M. and Riedel, K. (2023). Decolonising and Transforming Curricula for Teaching Linguistics and Language in South Africa: Taking Stock and Charting the Way Forward. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 8, a200. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v8i0.200

Edu. Sci. (2024). Influence of an African Indigenous Language on Classroom Interactions and Discourses. *Education Sciences*, 14(7), 1-12. https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/14/7/684

Flick, U. (2021). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 7th Edition, Sage Publications.

Hardman, J. (2024). Decolonising Pedagogy: A Critical Engagement with Debates in the University in South Africa. *Journal of Education*, 94, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i94a09

Heleta, S. (2019). Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Injustice and Coloniality. *Educational Review*, 71(2), 135-156. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1519750

Heleta, S. and Dilraj, I. (2024). Decolonisation is Not Even a Footnote: On the Dominant Ideologies and Smokescreens in South African Higher Education. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 9(0), a416. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v9i0.416

Kele, K. and Mzileni, P. (2021). Higher Education Leadership Responses Applied in Two South African Comprehensive Universities During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 6, a380. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v6i0.380

Kazeroony, H.H. and Du Plessis, Y. (2022). Decolonising South African Higher Education: Transforming Curricula by Resolving Dichotomies. In J. Pool, M.M. Fernandes-Martins and M. Fourie (Eds.), *A Scholarly Approach to Student Success in Higher Education*, 2, 215-229, Transformative Pedagogies, Axiom Academic Publishers. ISBN: 978-1-77630-468-4. https://doi.org/10.62869/001c.122444

Lebohang, V.M. (2024). Multilingual Integrated Pedagogical Model for Enhancing Mathematical Literacy in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 44(1), 1-16. https://journals.co.za/doi/full/10.17159/2520-9868/i95a02

Letsoalo, R. (2023). Policy, Practice, and the Challenges of Decolonising Curricula in South African Universities. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(2), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.20853/37-2-4782

Mahlangu, T. and Maseko, N. (2021). Decolonial Pedagogies in Higher Education: Strategies for Indigenous Knowledge Integration. *Journal of Education*, 89, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i89a05

Makhanya, T. and Zibane, S. (2020). Students' Voices on How Indigenous Languages are Disfavoured in South African Higher Education. *Language Matters*, 51(1), 20-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2020.1711533

Merriam, S.B. and Tisdell, E.J. (2019). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th Edition, Jossey-Bass.

Mkhize, N. (2021). Overcoming Institutional Resistance to Inclusive Education in South Africa. *African Journal of Educational Studies*, 19(1), 112-129. https://doi.org/10.23962/10539/33761

Mkhize, Z. (2022). Is it Transformation or Reform? The Lived Experiences of African Women Doctoral Students in South African Universities. *Higher Education*, 84(3), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00918-5.

Mlambo, R. and Matfunjwa, M. (2024). The Use of Technology to Preserve Indigenous Languages of South Africa. Literator. 45(1), 1-15. https://literator.org.za/index.php/literator/article/view/2007

Mpanza, S. (2023). The Emergence of Semilingualism: Are the Stipulations of the Language in Education Policy to Blame?. *South African Journal of Education*, 43(2), 1-14. https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.31920/2634-3649/2023/v13n1a9

Munyai, A. and Phooko, M.R. (2021). Is English Becoming a Threat to the Existence of Indigenous Languages in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa?. *De Jure Law Journal*, 54(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.17159/2225-7160/2021/v54a18

Nkomo, M. and Ngwenya, B. (2020). Leadership for Social Justice in Postcolonial Higher Education Contexts. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1451-1465. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1780923

Palinkas, L.A., Horwitz, S.M., Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Duan, N. and Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533-544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Shields, C.M. (2010). Transformative Leadership in Education: Equitable Change in an Uncertain and Complex World. Routledge, New York.

Shields, C.M. (2010). Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 558-589. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X10375609

Shields, C.M. (2020). Transformative Leadership in Education: Equitable Practices in a Global Context. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 48(5), 737-752. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220907120

Smith, J. and Coetzee, L. (2020). Decolonising Higher Education: Lessons from Global and Local Practices. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 11(25), 45-58. https://doi.org/10.7176/JEP

Universities South Africa. (2022). Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions Determined in Terms of Section 27 (2) of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 as Amended. https://usaf.ac.za/language-policy-

framework-for-public-higher-education-institutions-determined-in-terms-of-section-272-of-the-higher-education-act-101-of-1997-as-amended/

Universities South Africa. (2022). The State of Language Policies at Public Institutions. July 4. https://usaf.ac.za/the-state-of-language-policies-at-public-institutions/

Van Wyk, C. and Mbatha, S. (2022). Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Higher Education Curricula: Pedagogical Approaches and Challenges. *South African Journal of Education*, 42(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n1a2178

Zembylas, M. (2018). Decolonial Possibilities in South African Higher Education: Resisting Epistemic Injustice and Neoliberal Globalization. *Perspectives in Education*, 36(3), 139-152. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v36i3.2

Cite this article as: Matodzi G. Sikhwari and Thivhavhudzi M. Badugela (2025). Transformative Leadership and the Implementation of Decolonised Language Pedagogies in Higher Education. *International Journal of Languages and Culture*, 5(2), 61-72. doi: 10.51483/IJLC.5.2.2025.61-72.