



Castledown

 OPEN ACCESS

Intercultural Communication Education

ISSN 2209-1041

<https://www.castledown.com/journals/ice/>

Intercultural Communication Education, 9(1), 103482 (2026)

<https://doi.org/10.29140/ice.v9n1.103482>

Re-Imagining Knowledge Canons in South African Education: An Inquest into Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education



BONGINKOSI H. MUTONGOZA^a

SIVE MAKELENI^b

^aUniversity of Fort Hare, South Africa

bmutongoza@outlook.com

^bUniversity of Fort Hare, South Africa

simakeleni@ufh.ac.za

Abstract

This paper examines Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) in South Africa as a site for epistemic transformation rather than mere linguistic reform. While policy efforts have expanded access by incorporating African languages, classroom and institutional practices often remain rooted in Eurocentric epistemologies. Drawing on decolonial theory and existing empirical studies, the paper argues that MTbBE can only fulfil its transformative promise when language reform is coupled with pedagogical shifts, curriculum design, and institutional reward systems. It shows that translanguaging and bilingual pedagogy enhance comprehension and participation; yet, genuine transformation requires teachers to utilise African languages as resources for reasoning and knowledge creation. Re-authoring curricula and restructuring institutional incentives emerge as essential for sustaining such change. The paper contributes to debates on decolonisation by reframing MTbBE as a strategy for epistemic justice that links linguistic inclusion with cognitive renewal. It concludes that when African languages are recognised as instruments of inquiry, education can move from translation to transformation, fostering an intellectual order that reflects South Africa's multilingual and plural realities.

Keywords: Curriculum reform, decolonisation, epistemic justice, epistemic transformation, Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education

Copyright: © 2026 Bonginkosi H. Mutongoza & Sive Makeleni. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. **Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within this paper.

Introduction

Education in post-apartheid South Africa remains caught between the promise of transformation and the persistence of colonial structures. Makeleni (2024) argues that the relationship between language and schooling remains deeply political because English and Afrikaans continue to dominate as the languages of schooling, scholarship, and upward mobility, despite the constitutional affirmation of equality of languages. According to the Department of Basic Education (2024), the introduction of Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) aims to rectify this historical imbalance by enabling learners to study mathematics and science in the languages that shape their worlds. At the policy level, MTbBE marks a shift towards linguistic justice, while at the pedagogical level, it is meant to enhance understanding and learner participation (Ngubane & Ngwenya, 2025). Regrettably, Makeleni (2024) argues that more than two decades after the democratic transition, it has become clear that linguistic reform cannot dismantle the epistemic hierarchies inherited from colonial and apartheid education. The persistence of Eurocentric curricula, imported textbooks, and Western evaluation standards means that African learners struggle with knowledge systems that do not resonate with their lived realities (Mutongoza, 2025). Translating those systems into African languages may widen access, but it rarely changes the substance of what is taught or the assumptions underpinning it (Probyn, 2024; Ramadiro, 2022). As such, the paradox of translation without transformation forms the central motivation behind this article, as we acknowledge that while MTbBE expands participation, it risks reproducing colonial epistemologies in new linguistic forms.

The paper argues that MTbBE can only be a meaningful instrument of decolonisation when it is deliberately linked to a broader, often-elusive project of epistemic reform. The concern is positioning language as a site of knowledge production. In reading August-Mowers (2025), we recognise that when African languages are treated as legitimate vehicles for theorising, interpreting, and critiquing the world, they reshape what counts as knowledge and whose experiences are recognised as knowledge-bearing. Historically, the dominance of English and Afrikaans has served to entrench what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) refers to as the coloniality of knowledge, a concept that explains the privileging of European ways of knowing as universal. Decolonising language policy, therefore, demands challenging the epistemic order from which those languages were long excluded. Scholars such as Leibowitz (2017) and Malindi et al. (2023) have demonstrated that language-in-education reform has been consistently entwined with questions of power, legitimacy, and identity. They remind us that multilingualism is not automatically decolonial, and its emancipatory potential depends on how languages are positioned in relation to knowledge. The argument developed in this paper traces how MTbBE has advanced linguistic justice while essentially leaving epistemic hierarchies intact, and it explores how a re-imagined implementation could move the system from access to agency. This analysis draws on the dual theoretical strands of sociolinguistic research on bilingual education and decolonial thought on epistemic justice. The intersection of these literatures provides the conceptual space to rethink MTbBE as a potential engine for genuine epistemic transformation. Therefore, this paper draws these threads together to argue that the future of decolonial education depends on what language is used to teach and what that language is empowered to think.

Conceptual Clarification: Linguistic and Epistemic Justice

The theoretical point of departure is that linguistic justice and epistemic justice are inseparable in any project of decolonising education. Language is not a neutral medium for transmitting knowledge; it structures thought, authorises certain truths, and excludes others. Therefore, we are convinced that bilingual education also speaks of epistemic hierarchy and the politics of recognition.

MTbBE in Perspective

MTbBE refers to a model in which learners begin schooling in their first language while gradually acquiring competence in a second, usually English. As presented by the Department of Basic Education (2024), the model differs fundamentally from transitional bilingualism, where the home language serves merely as a bridge to English, and from additive bilingualism, which aims at dual proficiency without necessarily rebalancing power relations. MTbBE, as conceived in South African policy discourse, carries an explicit equity agenda to restore African languages to the centre of education as essential pillars of cognitive development, cultural continuity, and democratic participation. Makeleni et al. (2023) extend this view by emphasising that mother-tongue instruction enhances literacy and the cognitive flexibility required for complex reasoning. Nevertheless, without engaging with its epistemological consequences, implementing MTbBE will remain a technocratic exercise predominantly concerned with materials, timetables, and teacher deployment alone. In most classrooms, Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) demonstrate that English remains the gatekeeper of academic legitimacy, while African languages are tolerated for comprehension but rarely for theorisation. The deeper question to interrogate is whether those languages can generate disciplinary knowledge. We believe that if they are confined to translating pre-existing English concepts, the hierarchy of knowledge remains intact. This tension situates MTbBE within a broader debate about decolonial education by questioning who gets to learn and, more importantly, what is learned and how learning reconfigures the relationship between language and power. We situate this decolonial perspective by treating language policy as a terrain of epistemic struggle and a space where linguistic inclusion can either reinforce or subvert the colonial order.

Epistemic Justice and Decolonial Knowledge

The concept of epistemic justice provides a valuable lens for analysing this struggle. Fricker (2013) and Nielsen and Utsler (2022) distinguish between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, arguing that the former involves a credibility deficit assigned to certain speakers, while the latter concerns the structural exclusion of some experiences from the collective resources of meaning. In colonial contexts, as Mutongoza et al. (2023) note, both forms converge as African knowledges were denied credibility as epistemic agents, and African languages were excluded from the systems through which meaning and truth were produced. Scholars such as Mignolo (2002), Bhabra (2014), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) have argued that this exclusion constitutes the core of the coloniality of knowledge. The Western episteme has persistently presented itself as universal, relegating other knowledge systems to the realm of folklore or tradition. Within this hierarchy, European languages became the custodians of reason and science, while African languages were relegated to the sphere of culture and emotion (Leibowitz, 2017; Melber, 2018). The result is an enduring cognitive divide in which African learners must access modern knowledge through languages that estrange them from their social realities.

Epistemic justice seeks to repair this divide by recognising the plurality of knowledge systems and reconstructing the conditions under which different epistemic traditions can speak to one another. Applied to education, as Munyonga (2020) and Gibson et al. (2025) argue, this means designing curricula and pedagogies that expand the hermeneutical resources available to learners by allowing them to interpret their world through categories native to their own languages and cultures. As Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) demonstrate, MTbBE offers a practical mechanism for advancing this project and restores credibility to speakers and challenges testimonial injustice by legitimising African languages as languages of learning. Nevertheless, its transformative potential lies in addressing hermeneutical injustice by enabling new conceptualisations, argumentations, and critiques from African linguistic and cultural frameworks (Ngubane & Ngwenya, 2025; Ramadiro, 2022). The challenge is to ensure that bilingual education does not stop at access but extends into the realm of epistemic creation.

Within this theoretical frame, linguistic justice refers to the right to learn and be taught in one's own language, while epistemic justice refers to the right to produce and validate knowledge through that language. The first concerns participation, while the second concerns power. We contend that MTbBE will become decolonial only when it bridges the two and transforms classrooms from sites of linguistic accommodation into spaces of epistemic possibility where African languages function as languages of thought, theory, and critique. The following section examines how whiteness and coloniality continue to shape the South African curriculum, highlighting the importance of the link between language and epistemic justice in any credible vision of transformation.

Whiteness and the Curriculum

The South African curriculum continues to carry the residues of whiteness that have long structured the relationship between knowledge, culture, and power (Swartz et al., 2014). Although policy discourse since 1994 has emphasised inclusion and diversity, Makeleni (2024) cautions that the epistemic architecture of schooling remains anchored mainly in Eurocentric worldviews. Similarly, Leibowitz (2017), Mini and Botha (2020), and Robertson and Graven (2023) observe that the curriculum's underlying assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge and the language in which such knowledge must be articulated are still profoundly shaped by colonial and apartheid histories. Whiteness functions here not simply as racial identity but as an epistemic orientation, a way of seeing, valuing, and ordering the world.

Historically, the colonial university and the missionary school institutionalised this orientation by equating knowledge with Western languages and epistemologies. English and Afrikaans were positioned as the languages of intellect and civility, while African languages were treated as vernacular and sentimental. As Mutongoza et al. (2023) demonstrate, this hierarchy of language thus reinforced a hierarchy of thought. Blaser (2008) and Chimakonam (2019) persuade us that colonial education relied on the fallacious assumption that European languages carried the only legitimate grammar of reason, thereby rendering African languages incapable of sustaining abstract or scientific discourse. This legacy persists in the post-apartheid classroom, where, despite an official multilingual policy, English and Afrikaans continue to be the languages of success.

The curriculum also reproduces this hierarchy through its content and implicit epistemic standards. History, literature, and philosophy syllabi continue to privilege European canons, often presenting African knowledge as additive rather than foundational. Studies by Ramose (2003), Mbembe (2016), and Probyn (2024) have shown that the centrality of Europe universalises Western experiences while relegating African thought to the margins of intellectual legitimacy. In fields like philosophy, figures such as Vygotsky, Kant, and Hegel remain the unavoidable starting points, while African philosophers like Wiredu, Mudimbe, Hountondji, and Nkrumah are introduced as regional supplements. In the sciences, the colonial framing persists in privileging European modes of inquiry and erasing Indigenous systems of classification, measurement, and explanation (Chimakonam, 2019).

Whiteness similarly operates through assessment and pedagogy. Ramose (2003) and more recently, Probyn (2024) observe that classroom evaluation remains grounded in monolingual norms that reward the ability to reproduce English conceptual structures. Even when learners are encouraged to use African languages informally, their proficiency and success continue to be measured through English literacy, as demonstrated in greater detail by Makeleni (2024). This creates an inconsistency as the linguistic competence that the policy seeks to elevate becomes the very reason for learners' marginalisation when formal academic success is defined through a colonial language (Kretzer & Oluoch-Suleh, 2022; Malindi et al., 2023). The persistence of this contradiction reveals the depth of coloniality in the structures of assessment and accreditation.

Swartz et al. (2014) and Robertson and Graven (2023) remind us that the entrenchment of whiteness in curriculum design is as ideological as institutional. Universities and curriculum bodies remain tied to global benchmarks of excellence that equate quality with alignment to Euro-American models (Mini & Botha, 2020; Robertson & Graven, 2023). Studies like Melber (2018) and Mutongoza et al. (2023) reveal that research funding, journal rankings, and accreditation systems continue to reward the reproduction of Western knowledge while rendering African-language scholarship peripheral. This institutional inertia ensures that even progressive initiatives such as MTbBE operate within a framework that limits their transformative potential.

The persistence of coloniality is also discursive, as the very vocabulary of educational reform often reproduces the binary logic of colonial modernity, namely development versus tradition, global versus local, and modern science versus indigenous knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This is confirmed by Melber (2018), who argues that such binaries maintain the intellectual dependence of African education systems on European paradigms, making it challenging to imagine knowledge outside the epistemic authority of the North. Within this discursive frame, African languages appear as vehicles of cultural identity rather than as instruments of theory and critique.

Recognising this structure of whiteness enables a clearer understanding of why linguistic reform has not yet led to epistemic reform. The problem is that English dominates, and more importantly, that the epistemic grammar of English continues to define what it means to know (Gibson et al., 2025). When guided by that grammar, translation into African languages risks turning the local language into a mirror of the colonial one (Brahima, 2020; Hannoum, 2024). The result is what we deliberately term “linguistic inclusion without epistemic reorientation,” meaning that while learners may access knowledge more easily, the knowledge remains framed within Eurocentric canons. To dismantle this condition, whiteness must be addressed as an epistemic system rather than a demographic one. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Mbembe (2016) insist, decolonisation requires delinking from the colonial matrix of power that continues to define whose knowledge matters. In educational practice, this means moving beyond the representational inclusion of African texts and interrogating how curricula organise meaning. MTbBE fails to operationalise epistemic justice because it changes the language of instruction without transforming the underlying Eurocentric knowledge systems, power relations, and assessment regimes that continue to marginalise African ways of knowing.

We, however, recognise that MTbBE offers a strategic entry point into this process. When learners engage disciplinary knowledge through their own languages, they bring alternative frameworks of reasoning to bear on the curriculum. For example, in environmental education projects documented by Ngubane and Ngwenya (2025), students using isiZulu and isiXhosa drew on local ecological metaphors to interpret scientific processes, generating new insights rather than merely translating established ones. Such practices demonstrate that the curriculum shifts when linguistic space is created for African epistemologies (Akinmolayan et al., 2024). However, we must caution that the transformative potential of MTbBE depends on conscious design. Without revising the curricular logic that privileges Western paradigms, the use of African languages can easily be reduced to a pedagogical convenience (August-Mowers, 2025; Canham, 2018). Therefore, teacher education must prepare practitioners to recognise the epistemic assumptions embedded in content and use bilingual pedagogy as a form of critique. This aligns with recent calls for intellectual independence through self-conscious mediation between inherited and local knowledges.

The continued dominance of whiteness in the curriculum explains why linguistic reform has failed to yield profound structural change. The decolonisation of education cannot proceed through language policy alone; it requires a deliberate reconstitution of epistemic authority. MTbBE is significant precisely because it unsettles the linguistic foundation of coloniality, but it will remain partial until the

curriculum reflects African ways of knowing, arguing, and imagining. The following section examines the achievements of MTbBE to date and explores how its implementation has advanced linguistic justice, even as it struggles to penetrate the deeper layers of epistemic transformation.

The Promise of MTbBE: Linguistic Justice as a Starting Point

MTbBE emerged in South Africa as part of a broader post-1994 commitment to linguistic equity and cognitive access. The approach recognises that learners think, reason, and imagine most effectively in the languages that structure their early social experience. In legitimising African languages as media of instruction, MTbBE challenges the historical monopoly of English and Afrikaans beyond the foundation phase and affirms the constitutional principle that all languages possess equal worth. Therefore, MTbBE represents an ethical commitment to linguistic justice at its most immediate level. MTbBE restores voice, dignity, and a sense of belonging to learners whom the linguistic hierarchies of schooling have long alienated.

Pedagogical and Cognitive Gains

Research has consistently demonstrated the pedagogical benefits of instruction in the mother tongue. Studies like Omidire and Ayob (2022) and Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) reveal that cognitive development depends on continuity between the language at home and the language of schooling. Comprehension falters when this continuity is broken, and the learner's confidence erodes. Mini and Botha (2020) and Ramadiro (2022) argue that extended bilingual models, in which African languages remain central through the intermediate grades, produce higher levels of conceptual understanding than transitional programmes that shift early to English. A recent study by Malindi et al. (2023) reports that learners participating in isiXhosa-medium science and mathematics lessons demonstrate stronger conceptual retention and problem-solving abilities than their peers in English-only classes. Likewise, Ngubane and Ngwenya (2025) find that when learners move fluidly between isiZulu and English through translanguaging, they generate richer explanations and a more confident sense of intellectual ownership. We interpret these gains as evidence that multilingual classrooms have the potential to reconfigure participation by drawing on the whole linguistic repertoire of learners and creating spaces where understanding is negotiated rather than imposed. These outcomes confirm that MTbBE has seen gains in addressing the most visible injustices of colonial education by providing linguistic access, enhancing comprehension, and affirming identity.

Social and Political Recognition

Beyond pedagogy, MTbBE carries symbolic and political weight. August-Mowers (2025) notes that the public use of African languages in schooling functions as an act of social recognition as it signals to communities that their languages (and by implication, their histories) belong within the nation's intellectual life. Drawing from Mndende and Nkomo (2025), for many parents and learners, the experience of encountering textbooks, examinations, and classroom discourse in home languages represents a tangible expression of post-apartheid citizenship. The classroom thus becomes a microcosm of linguistic democracy, where African languages are not tolerated as tokens of heritage but operationalised as media of modern learning (van Pinxteren, 2022). This recognition extends to the symbolic order of education, as when teachers employ African languages to explain complex ideas, they perform a subtle act of epistemic affirmation, demonstrating that these languages can convey precision, abstraction, and critique (Zhou & Landa, 2019). In contexts long defined by linguistic assimilation, this gesture re-centres African languages as instruments of intellectual work. The shift, however limited, challenges the fictive colonial narrative that some languages are inherently superior, more rational and universal than others. Therefore, MTbBE marks a rupture in policy and the collective imagination of what language can do.

Institutional and Policy Advances

At the institutional level, the Department of Basic Education's frameworks for language-in-education have begun to accommodate bilingual and multilingual models, and several universities have initiated pilot projects extending mother-tongue instruction into teacher education. As Ramadiro (2022) and Ngubane and Ngwenya (2025) demonstrate, this created opportunities for initiatives where universities collaborated with provincial departments to produce bilingual learning materials for mathematics and science. Although uneven, these developments indicate that MTbBE has the potential to reshape institutional practice and public discourse. Leibowitz (2017) and Mutongoza et al. (2023) observe that such policy moves may foster a broader intellectual climate in which linguistic inclusion becomes a criterion of educational quality. As Makeleni (2024) argues, where English proficiency once served as the leading competence index, multilingual proficiency is increasingly a marker of educational innovation. This subtle shift signals the emergence of a new normative order that recognises linguistic diversity as a national resource rather than a remedial challenge.

The Limits of Linguistic Justice

We caution that the achievements of MTbBE must be understood as provisional. Linguistic justice, while essential, does not automatically produce epistemic justice in science and mathematics. The risk is that language reform remains confined to the surface of pedagogy while the deeper curriculum and assessment structures remain untouched (August-Mowers, 2025; Bakshi, 2021). Translation, as Turner (2023) and Hannoum (2024) warn, can extend access to Eurocentric knowledge without altering its substance. Learners may solve equations or interpret texts in their home languages, but they still operate within frameworks that privilege Western assumptions about what constitutes truth, evidence, or reason. Comparative studies across the continent, such as those by Kretzer and Oluoch-Suleh (2022), reveal similar patterns in which mother-tongue education initiatives improve literacy and engagement, but rarely transform epistemic hierarchies. The problem lies in the separation of language policy from knowledge policy. When implemented as a technical exercise focused on textbooks, timetables, and teacher deployment, previous studies, such as Phipps (2019) and Vandeyar (2019), suggest that MTbBE will fail to address the underlying question of whose knowledge is being taught. As a result, linguistic inclusion may coexist with epistemic dependence. Probyn (2024) cautions that multilingual classrooms often remain governed by English norms of textuality and assessment, which continue to determine success. Learners are encouraged to speak African languages but are examined and rewarded in English. This dynamic reproduces what Call-Cummings et al. (2024) describe as the "bifurcated consciousness" of the postcolonial subject, fluent in the language of power but alienated from the language of identity.

Re-Centring MTbBE as an Epistemic Project

Recognising both the gains and the limits of MTbBE clarifies its dual character. It is simultaneously an instrument of access and a potential site of epistemic transformation. The first stage of linguistic justice has advanced considerably; the second stage of epistemic justice remains largely unrealised. Moving forward, the challenge is harnessing the linguistic opening created by MTbBE to re-imagine the production and validation of knowledge itself. In this sense, MTbBE should be viewed as a philosophical and political project as well as a means of expanding the intellectual architecture of South African education. Its success will ultimately be measured by how many learners it reaches and how it reshapes the relationship between language, knowledge, and power. The following section, therefore, examines the limits of current practice by exploring how the dominance of translation over transformation will continue to constrain the decolonial potential of MTbBE.

Translation Without Transformation? The Limits of MTbBE

An equivalent transformation of epistemic foundations has not matched the success of MTbBE in expanding access to knowledge. The policy is poised to achieve symbolic and pedagogical advances, but its implementation appears destined to reproduce the hierarchies it was intended to dismantle. Translation has become the convenient instrument of reform, while the transformation of the deeper epistemic and institutional shifts remains elusive. The result, we caution, may be a system that speaks African languages but still thinks in colonial terms.

The Logic of Translation

At the level of practice, MTbBE has primarily been operationalised as a process of translating English learning materials into African languages. Curriculum designers frequently render English textbooks, syllabi, and assessment rubrics into African languages, assuming linguistic substitution will yield pedagogical equity. Leibowitz (2017) and Heugh (2022) both caution that this approach mistakes the symptom for the cause. The problem with postcolonial African education systems is not simply that learners cannot access English content, but that the content itself embodies a particular world-view that alienates Indigenous knowledges. When translation merely reproduces those frameworks in African languages, it risks perpetuating epistemic dependency. In line with Gibson et al. (2025), we argue that translation merely broadens participation without undermining authority. Thus, English remains universalised as the source from which acceptable knowledge flows, and African languages serve as the medium through which that knowledge is delivered. This hierarchy is reinforced and affirmed by the symbolic capital associated with English as the language of academic legitimacy. According to Malindi et al. (2023), teachers and parents often perceive English as authoritative and their translations as secondary approximations. As such, the act of translation thus confirms the primacy of the colonial language rather than challenging it. Studies such as Kretzer and Oluoch-Suleh (2022) and Mndende and Nkomo (2025) observe that this phenomenon produces a surface multilingualism where classrooms appear linguistically inclusive, yet the epistemic script remains unchanged. Inevitably, learners will be able to articulate Western knowledge in African languages, but their thinking will continue to orbit around concepts and categories shaped elsewhere.

The Technocratic Turn

The dominance of translation reflects a broader technocratic approach to language policy. Implementation efforts so far appear to have prioritised logistics of terminology development, material production, and teacher placement over philosophical rethinking. Mini and Botha (2020) note that resource constraints have encouraged this pragmatic orientation since translating existing materials is more cost-effective and efficient than developing new content rooted in African epistemologies. This presents a risk that provincial departments, under pressure to demonstrate progress, may therefore adopt this strategy to meet policy targets. While such pragmatism is understandable, it narrows the transformative horizon of MTbBE. Reducing language reform to a technical problem of resource delivery diverts attention from the epistemic challenge of knowledge production. As demonstrated in Omodire and Ayob (2022), teachers are often trained to use African languages as instruction vehicles but seldom prepared to teach through them in ways that generate new knowledge. As a result, African languages remain mediators rather than creators of disciplinary discourse. This technocratic drift also permeates teacher education, as Ramadiro (2022) and Probyn (2024) observe that many teacher-training programmes focus on code-switching strategies and bilingual classroom management, while avoiding the deeper work of reconstructing curricula through indigenous epistemic categories. Thus, teachers learn how to move between languages but not how to rethink what those languages can mean for knowledge itself. Consequently, MTbBE risks being implemented as an additional tool rather than re-imagining education's intellectual foundations.

Institutional Incentives and Global Pressures

Institutional and global pressures reinforce the persistence of translation over transformation. Universities and research councils continue to measure success through English-dominant metrics, such as publication counts in international journals, adherence to Euro-American citation standards, and alignment with global curricula. As Robertson and Graven (2023) point out, these benchmarks reward conformity to Western knowledge systems while discouraging innovation in African languages. August-Mowers (2025) and Sibanda and Tshela (2025) argue that this institutional logic exerts a powerful gravitational pull, and even well-intentioned reforms eventually orbit back to Eurocentrism because accreditation, funding, and prestige are tied to it. In such a context, MTbBE risks becoming a symbolic exercise useful for national rhetoric but marginal in shaping academic value. The work of Zhou and Landa (2019) signals that translating Western knowledge into African languages may thus satisfy inclusivity mandates without disrupting the hierarchy that deems Western knowledge superior. The dominance of global English creates an economic rationale for maintaining the status quo, as evidenced by the sentiments of parents, educators, and policymakers who fear that excessive localisation will disadvantage learners (Robertson & Graven, 2023; Zhou & Landa, 2019). While this anxiety is not unfounded, as demonstrated by the continued dominance of English as the lingua franca of global commerce and academia, we contend that this argument conflates global participation with epistemic imitation. Learners can be globally competent without being epistemically dependent, provided their education affirms multiple epistemic centres.

Pedagogical Dissonance

Within classrooms, these structural tensions manifest as pedagogical dissonance. Teachers are expected to use African languages but are assessed against English-medium standards. When learners are encouraged to express understanding in their mother tongues yet examined through English rubrics, it results in what Burns et al. (2022) call a “split habitus”, an internal division between the language of thought and the language of success. This condition generates cognitive friction because learners may grasp concepts intuitively in their first language but struggle to demonstrate mastery in assessments. Probyn’s (2024) work demonstrates how teachers navigate this tension through strategic translanguaging, moving fluidly between languages to clarify meaning, foster participation, and validate learners’ experiences. Nevertheless, Phipps (2019) demonstrates that even these creative practices occur within institutional limits as the curriculum remains monolingual at its epistemic core. Translanguaging, although empowering, becomes a compensatory strategy for systemic incoherence. We remind ourselves that the underlying issue in South Africa, consistent with most postcolonial education systems, is not linguistic mixing but the absence of epistemic parity between languages.

MTbBE as a Site of Epistemic Renewal

Although MTbBE has opened the linguistic space needed for more profound intellectual transformation, the challenge is to turn that opening into epistemic substance by changing how teachers teach and design the curriculum, as well as how institutions define academic value. When these levels operate coherently, language reform can grow into a sustained re-imagining of knowledge production and transmission within African contexts.

Pedagogy: Changing How Teachers Orient Knowledge

Classroom practice is the first arena in which epistemic renewal can take hold. According to Zhou and Landa (2019) and Sibanda and Tshela (2025), translanguaging has improved comprehension and participation, yet many teachers use the home language only to clarify English content. Probyn’s (2024) research

indicates that better results are achieved when the home language serves as a tool of reasoning, enabling learners to test ideas through their own conceptual systems. Teacher education should therefore cultivate the ability to build on learners' linguistic resources, link local concepts to disciplinary problems, and document oral reasoning as evidence of understanding (van Pinxteren, 2022). Mentoring and collegial networks help teachers sustain such innovation. A reading of Musundire and Lumadi (2019) convinces us that assessment must also evolve so that oral presentations, debates, and collaborative inquiries are recognised as valid demonstrations of learning, aligning evaluation with the epistemic aims of bilingual pedagogy.

Curriculum: Re-Authoring What Learners Study

Curriculum determines the intellectual centre of education and often preserves inherited hierarchies. Translating English materials into African languages preserves their underlying assumptions, whereas re-authoring allows knowledge to emerge from African conceptual frameworks (Hannoum, 2024). Science can incorporate indigenous ecological systems, while history can foreground oral memory and local chronologies. Ramadiro's (2022) bilingual modules show the creative potential of this work, though Mini and Botha's (2022) account of Eastern Cape projects highlights the need for stable funding and coordination. Building on Brahima (2020), we opine that collaborative networks linking subject experts, linguists, and community knowledge holders are essential. Lexical development offers a practical entry point, as bilingual glossaries in mathematics and science illustrate how technical vocabulary can evolve through classroom use, preparing the ground for textbooks that encourage learners to think conceptually within their own languages.

Institutions: Changing the Incentives that Shape Knowledge

Pedagogical and curricular change will remain fragile without institutional commitment. According to Mutongoza (2025), universities and funding bodies still equate excellence with English-language output, a standard that limits epistemic diversity. Robertson and Graven (2023) note that prevailing metrics discourage experimentation, and reading Ramadiro's (2022) work persuades us to argue that revising academic reward systems is indispensable for lasting reform. We propose that institutions can begin by funding African-language curriculum development, adjusting promotion criteria to recognise multilingual scholarship, and supporting research on alternative assessment formats. The cooperation, as described by Kretzer and Oluoch-Suleh (2022), can result in the sharing of costs and expertise through joint textbook production and teacher-education initiatives, thereby creating a continental base for the generation of African-language knowledge.

Practical Constraints and Pragmatic Sequencing

Transforming an education system with a long history of privileging English and Afrikaans demands patience and credible demonstrations of success. Makeleni (2024) contends that developing new materials, retraining teachers, and shifting public attitudes require sustained investment. Many families still associate English with employment, so reforms should proceed through targeted pilots in subjects where African languages already offer conceptual strength, such as environmental studies, early mathematics, and local history (Akinmolayan et al., 2024; Malindi et al., 2023). Proven results in these areas can build wider confidence in the potential of Indigenous languages in education. As such, institutions can reinforce early progress through research grants, postgraduate bursaries, and recognition awards for bilingual scholarship, establishing examples of legitimacy that accumulate into systemic change.

Epistemic Renewal as Continuing Work

Epistemic renewal is a continuing process rather than a policy event. Colonial knowledge structures reappear whenever reforms lose reflexivity. A reading of Vandeyar (2019) and Mini and Botha (2020)

signals that curriculum change without constant reflection risks the emergence of new forms of exclusion. As demonstrated by Jansen et al. (2025), sustainable transformation requires periodic review, open critique, and engagement with communities whose knowledge traditions the school system draws upon. Treating each reform phase as a living experiment encourages adaptation and prevents stagnation. MTbBE has already unsettled the linguistic foundations of education, as Malindi et al. (2023) demonstrate. However, as Gibson et al. (2025) infer, its next phase should consolidate this shift by ensuring that African languages become engines of thought rather than conduits for translated content. Only when teachers, scholars, and institutions use these languages to explore new concepts and produce original insights will education begin to reflect the intellectual diversity and social realities of contemporary South Africa.

Counterarguments and Reflexive Constraints

Support for MTbBE is widely expressed across South Africa's education landscape, yet its expansion exposes tensions that reveal the depth of the transformation it demands. Practical and institutional obstacles remain persistent. Mini and Botha (2020) note that developing African-language materials and training bilingual teachers require resources that many provinces lack, leading departments to prefer incremental translation of English texts. This short-term pragmatism risks reinforcing dependence on the epistemic frameworks those texts embody. The cost of reform is real, but the cost of intellectual stagnation is higher. Investing in African-language resources lays the foundation for future literacy and innovation, rather than merely providing access. Institutional inertia compounds the problem. As Leibowitz (2017) and Robertson and Graven (2023) observe, universities continue to measure quality through English-language publications, while teachers committed to MTbBE often lack professional support or mentoring (Ndebele, 2019; Probyn, 2024). Therefore, reform requires reconfiguring the structures that define value, with funding and promotion systems that reward African-language scholarship, and collaborative training models that sustain pedagogical confidence over time.

Other objections emerge from ideological and sociocultural concerns that intersect with the pragmatic ones. Critics worry that a strong emphasis on African languages may limit global competitiveness. However, evidence from Makeleni et al. (2023) shows the opposite, as learners who first develop conceptual understanding in their home languages acquire second-language proficiency more effectively than those schooled through early English immersion. The real risk lies in superficial bilingualism, which produces neither deep literacy in African languages nor confident mastery of English. A further anxiety concerns the risk of essentialism. Vandeyar (2019) reminds us that indigeneity can harden into dogma when disconnected from critique, and that decolonial renewal must foster dynamic exchange rather than cultural isolation. Studies like Melber (2018) and Mutongoza et al. (2023) extend this position by warning of the possibility of linguistic recolonisation, where dominant African languages reproduce hierarchies of exclusion. MTbBE's success, therefore, depends on maintaining critical hybridity, ensuring that African languages become platforms for dialogue and creation rather than monuments to identity. When reforms engage these tensions rather than suppress them, they develop the intellectual reflexivity necessary for genuine epistemic transformation.

Conclusion – From Access to Agency

This paper has argued that the transformative potential of MTbBE in South Africa depends on its capacity to move beyond linguistic inclusion toward epistemic change. While language reform expands access, genuine decolonisation requires transforming what counts as knowledge and how it is produced, taught, and valued. The analysis demonstrates that pedagogy, curriculum, and institutional design must operate together to shift African languages from tools of translation to instruments of inquiry. Evidence from bilingual classrooms and teacher education experiments shows that when

learners reason, read, and write in their home languages, they engage more deeply and extend conceptual boundaries. However, such innovations remain fragile at best without institutional recognition and long-term investment. This paper adds to ongoing debates on decolonial education by framing MTbBE as an epistemic project rather than a linguistic policy, arguing that its success lies in creating conditions where African languages generate knowledge rather than merely convey it. Achieving this condition demands sustained political will, collaborative scholarship, and reflexive practice. When these elements align, MTbBE can advance from access to transformation, establishing African languages as living instruments of thought and legitimate vehicles for intellectual and social renewal.

References

- Akinmolayan, E. S., Hingston, C. A., Akpan, U. J., & Arise, O. A. (2024). Towards decolonisation of primary school education in South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 14(1), Article 1440. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1440>
- August-Mowers, C. M. (2025). The slowly turning wheels on mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) finally stopped. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 39(3), 16–36. <https://dx.doi.org/10.20853/39-3-7348>
- Bakshi, S. (2021). Towards the unmaking of canons: Decolonising the study of literature. In D. S. Thomas & J. Arday (Eds.), *Doing equity and diversity for success in higher education: Redressing structural inequalities in the academy* (pp. 117–126). Springer International Publishing.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2014). Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues. *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(2), 115–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414>
- Blaser, T. (2008). Looking at the heart of whiteness in South Africa today. *Safundi*, 9(1), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533170701762990>
- Brahima, A. (2020). Conceptual decolonisation, endogenous knowledge, and translation. In E. T. Woldegiorgis, I. Turner & A. Brahima (Eds.), *Decolonisation of higher education in Africa: Perspectives from hybrid knowledge production* (pp. 118–139). Routledge.
- Burns, E. A., Andrews, J., & James, C. (2022). Bourdieu might understand: Indigenous habitus clivé in the Australian academy. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 71(1), 51–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2022.2033691>
- Call-Cummings, M., Hassell-Goodman, S., Best, A. L., Castillo, M., Espinoza-Villejo, S., Moore, K., Moore, A., Revell, M., & Romero, A. (2024). Decolonising relationality: Reflections from the summer institute in anti-racist and decolonising research methods. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 25(3), 194–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086241250073>
- Canham, H. (2018). Reviled bodies of knowledge in the South African university. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 40(2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/F7402040940>
- Chimakonam, J. O. (2019). *Ezumezu: A system of logic for African philosophy and studies*. Springer.
- Fricker, M. (2013). Epistemic justice as a condition of political freedom? *Synthese*, 190(7), 1317–1332. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-012-0227-3>
- Gibson, H., Lück, J., Riedel, K., Namboodiripad, S. (2025). The role of African languages in transformation and decolonisation. In H. Gibson, J. Lück, K. Riedel & S. Namboodiripad (Eds.), *African linguistics after #RhodesMustFall: Contextualising the role of African languages in higher education in times of global change* (pp. 75–90). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-74817-2_5
- Hannoum, A. (2024). On translation ddeology. In C. Chambers & I. Demir (Eds.), *Translation and decolonisation: Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 78–94). Routledge.
- Jansen, J., Motala, S., & Singh, M. (2025). Beyond decolonisation: Criticism, comparison and conjectures from the global south. *Comparative Education*, 61(3), 325–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2025.2463803>

- Kretzer, M. M., & Oluoch-Suleh, E. (2022). (Hidden) potentials for African languages in curriculum reforms: Examples from Kenya and South Africa. *SN Social Sciences*, 2(8), Article 154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-022-00440-6>
- Leibowitz, B. (2017). Power, knowledge and learning: Dehegemonising colonial knowledge. *Alternation Journal*, 24(2), 99–119. <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2017/v24n2a6>
- Makeleni, S. (2024). Tongue-tied: Language-based exclusion at a South African university. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Sociality Studies*, 4, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijss-2024.vol4.21>
- Makeleni, S., Mutongoza, B., Linake, M., & Ndu, O. (2023). Teacher self-efficacy and learner assessment: A perspective from literature on South African Indigenous languages in the foundation phase. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 5(3), 44–64. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.2023.30>
- Malindi, Z., Ndebele, C., & Gobingca, B. Z. (2023). Examining teachers' views on the adoption of mother tongue-based bilingual education in mathematics teaching and learning: A South African context. *South African Journal of Education*, 43(si2), S1–S12. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v43ns2a2242>
- Mbembe, J. A. (2016). Decolonising the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513>
- Melber, H. (2018). Knowledge production and decolonisation—Not only African challenges. *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 40(1). <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v40i1.266>
- Mignolo, W. D. (2002). The geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(1), 57–96. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>
- Mini, B. M., & Botha, C. R. (2020). Eastern Cape's Language-in-Education policy implementation initiative for bilingual education: A historical and onion metaphor conceptualisation. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 40(2), 139–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2020.1804203>
- Mndende, A., & Nkomo, D. (2025). Multilingual examination question papers: A case study of emergent formal multilingual assessments in South Africa. In *EDULEARN25 Proceedings* (pp. 6660–6665). <https://doi.org/10.21125/edulearn.2025.1636>
- Munyonga, A. (2020). Global coloniality through science and technology: The theft of African traditional medicine. In A. Nhemachena, N. Hlabangane & J. Z. Matowanyika (Eds.), *Decolonising Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in an age of technocolonialism: Re-centring African Indigenous knowledge and belief systems* (pp. 99–124). Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group.
- Musundire, A., & Lumadi, R. I. (2019). Decolonising assessment practices in higher institutions of learning for quality assurance: Critical thinking theoretical perspective. In K. G. Fomunyan (Ed.), *Decolonising higher education in the era of globalisation and internationalisation* (pp. 145–159). Sun Press.
- Mutongoza, B. H. (2025). Epistemic justice, institutional transformation and the pursuit of a decolonised African academe. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Sociality Studies*, 5(1), Article 04. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijss-2025.vol5.1.04>
- Mutongoza, B., Mutanho, C., Linake, M., & Makeleni, S. (2023). Reflections on decolonising of medium of instruction at South African universities. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 5(2), 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.11>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.-J. (2018). Provincializing Europe and deprovincialising Africa: Prospects for decolonising the humanities. *Présence Africaine*, 197(1), 337–362. <https://doi.org/10.3917/presa.197.0337>
- Ngubane, S. P., & Ngwenya, E. T. (2025). Implementing mother tongue based bilingual education through translanguaging in multilingual classrooms: A systematic review. *International Journal*

- of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 24(6), 741–757. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.6.34>
- Nielsen, C. R., & Utsler, D. (2022). Gadamer, Fricker, and Honneth: Testimonial injustice, prejudice, and social esteem. In P. Giladi & N. McMillan (Eds.), *Epistemic injustice and the philosophy of recognition* (pp. 63–86). Routledge.
- Omidire, M. F., & Ayob, S. (2022). The utilisation of translanguaging for learning and teaching in multilingual primary classrooms. *Multilingua*, 41(1), 105–129. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2020-0072>
- Phipps, A. (2019). *Decolonising multilingualism: Struggles to decreate* (Vol. 1). Multilingual Matters.
- Probyn, M. J. (2024). Multilingual literacies for learning: Shifting ideologies, developing praxis. *Reading & Writing*, 15(1), Article 505. <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v15i1.505>
- Ramadiro, B. (2022). Implementing multilingual teacher education: Reflections on the University of Fort Hare’s bi/multilingual Bachelor of Education degree programme. *Education as Change*, 26(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/11270>
- Ramose, M. (2003). I doubt, therefore African philosophy exists. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 22(2), 113–127. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajpem.v22i2.31364>
- Robertson, S. A., & Graven, M. (2023). Understanding the slow ‘multilingual turn’. In A. Stott (Compiler), *Intersecting research, policy and practice for a sustainable praxis in mathematics, science and technology education: New possibilities and directions for the post-COVID-19 pandemic era* (pp. 162–165). SAARMSTE.
- Sibanda, R., & Tshehla, L. P. (2025). From mother tongue to English: A language policy shift at a multilingual township school in Gauteng. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 15(1), Article 1598. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v15i1.1598>
- Swartz, S., Arogundade, E., & Davis, D. (2014). Unpacking (white) privilege in a South African university classroom: A neglected element in multicultural educational contexts. *Journal of Moral Education*, 43(3), 345–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2014.922942>
- Turner, I. (2023). Decolonisation through digitalisation? African languages at South African universities. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 43(Suppl 1), 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-023-00196-w>
- van Pinxteren, B. (2022). The “elephant in the room”: Why and how medium of instruction and decolonisation of education are linked. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 17(2), 79–91. <https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29496>
- Vandeyar, S. (2019). Why decolonising the South African university curriculum will fail. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(7), 783–796. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1592149>
- Zhou, S., & Landa, N. (2019). Translanguaging as foundational pedagogy: Disrupting hegemonies for academic access in multilingual spaces. *Alternation*, 26(2), 290–310. <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2019/v26n2a13>