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Neoliberalism in South African higher education language policy: A decolonial perspective

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The global spread and hegemony of English as a medium of teaching, learning and research has come to be closely associated with neoliberalisation of higher education in the universities across the world, and has negatively impacted on epistemic issues, especially in Global South universities. No permanent solution has been found on challenges of English hegemony, particularly in African higher education. This article adds to the advancement of neoliberal discourse in higher education in South Africa by analysing neoliberal manifestations in its higher education language policy agenda. The article used desktop analysis to assess relevant literature on mainstream neoliberal ideologies and manifestations in the language policy reform post-apartheid. Drawing on relevant literature and through critical discourse analysis, it integrated evidence from the selected sources associated with mainstream neoliberal ideologies and then analysed the neoliberal manifestations in the language policy reforms pursued in South African post-apartheid context to bring out how the neoliberal actors in the higher education sector have reconfigured neoliberal principles. The decolonial perspective premised on concepts such as coloniality of being, power and knowledge was used to critique the neoliberal manifestations in South African higher education language policy directives. The paper presents the argument that universities in the country are deeply entrenched in linguistic hierarchisation which perpetuates epistemic injustices in teaching and learning. The African higher education should endeavour to underpin its language policies in indigenous knowledge systems to help harness the African content while existing in a global space where all knowledges should be regarded as equally relevant.

Contribution: This article contributes to the emerging discourse of neoliberalism in higher education in the Global South and its impact on language policy formulation and implementation.

Keywords: decolonial lens; higher education; global capitalism; language hegemony; language hierarchisation; language policy; linguistic imperialism; neoliberalism.

Introduction

The global spread and hegemony of English as a medium of teaching, learning and research has come to be closely associated with neoliberalisation of higher education in the universities across the world and has negatively impacted on epistemic issues, especially in Global South universities. No permanent solution has been found on challenges of English hegemony, particularly in African higher education language policy and practice where there is neoliberal surveillance (Le Grange et al. 2024). The use of English as a primary medium of teaching and learning in Africa and the Global South has particularly been critiqued for reproducing older forms of cultural, linguistic, economic and imperial political domination (Phillipson 2018; Wa Thiong'o 2009). Other scholars argue that the role of English in the various language policies in higher education in Africa and elsewhere is closely tied to the socioeconomic neoliberal order, which is the contemporary economic and political logic behind globalisation (Mayaba, Ralarala & Angu 2018; Price 2014). This article extends a similar argument that, at its worst, in the higher education sector, neoliberalism has forced universities and institutions of higher learning to shift the focus from pedagogical values to competitive, capitalist, entrepreneurial pedagogical models and approaches, which worsen inequalities in access to education (Munyaradzi 2024; Price 2014). Victims suffer from marginalisation and stigma.

The higher education system in South Africa is entrapped in structural, existential crisis (Heleta 2016; Kumalo 2020; Madlingozi 2018). To a greater extent, the crisis is exacerbated by the failure to effectually challenge the effects of imperialism and the hegemonic neoliberal ideology, which

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Hlatshwayo (2022) asserts continues to shape higher education in the country. The language question in South African higher education is addressed in the statutory policy frameworks and directives, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the *Higher Education Act of 1997*, the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training of 2020 and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training 2013, among others. All these focus on the need to promote the development and growth of the official indigenous languages for teaching and learning so as to improve student access to knowledge (Department of Education 1997; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2013, 2020; Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996). However, to date, no permanent solution has been found to the challenges related to linguistic imperialism in the multilingual South African university contexts. Thus, the unchallenged dominance of English in South African universities negatively impacts on students' knowledge and epistemic access, especially those whose linguistic background is not English. This happens despite the new language policy for higher education (LPHE) which exhorts the promotion of multilingualism and the advancement and use of the 10 official indigenous languages of South Africa (DHET 2020). Such a move would enhance meaningful participation by university students and staff in various activities (2020:5). There is a policy crisis because the LPHE contradicts itself by elevating English as the de facto medium of instruction (DHET 2020:15), making it difficult for the higher education institutions in the country to implement multilingual pedagogical practices more meaningfully. It is unfortunate that the LPHE, as amended, does not have any monitoring instrument in place as it merely promises that the department will develop it. Thus, English hegemony remains the elephant in the room that has to be challenged in South African higher education and other institutions of higher learning elsewhere in the Global South. That done, epistemic access would be guaranteed to those students who learn through the medium of a second or third language.

This hegemonic neoliberal discourse manifests through the different South African national policy and legislative directives such as the language policy on higher education and specific institutional language policies that guide teaching, learning and research operations in universities across the country. It is against this backdrop that the article sought to analyse and critique the neoliberal manifestations in the language policy reforms pursued in African higher education, pinning down to the post-apartheid South Africa. This article contributes to the neoliberal discourse in higher education in Africa by analysing how it manifests in the language policy frameworks in use. Using some decolonial concepts such as coloniality of being, knowledge and power, the article discusses how neoliberalism plays out through the intersectionality of neocolonial, capitalistic tendencies, internationalisation of higher education and linguistic hierarchisation in teaching and learning which divide people as either competently possessing the English capital or not, a determinant in upward mobility and prospects for better societies and individuals who fulfil the global imperatives.

Research methods and design

Desktop review, a research method that depends on already-published material (Booth & Carroll 2015), was conducted online to locate the sources for the purpose of this article. This method was adopted to find relevant literature and discourse associated with mainstream neoliberal ideologies and manifestations in the language policy reforms pursued in South African post-apartheid context to bring out how the neoliberal actors in the higher education sector have reconfigured neoliberal principles. Scopus, ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar and EBSCO were used as search engines to find the literature, using terms such as African higher education, decoloniality, global capitalism, language hegemony, language hierarchisation, LPHE, linguistic imperialism and neoliberalism. Literature from 2014 to the present was considered as an inclusion criterion; hence, anything outside this period was discarded unless it was seminal work. A total of 2768 sources were identified through the desktop search. From that figure, a total of 2036 sources were removed because they were duplicates. The remaining 732 sources were further screened, and 657 were removed as irrelevant because they were based on non-African contexts and published before 2014. The remaining 75 full articles were further assessed for eligibility by reading their abstracts to check for their relevance in the study. From that assessment, 17 sources were excluded as they focused on transforming education without anything on neoliberalism or language policy. Thus, 58 sources were eventually found eligible and used in the study. The relevant protected document format (pdf) articles were then downloaded and saved. Following that, a spreadsheet was developed for data storage. Details about the research methodology used, type of paper, author, title and date of publication were captured in the spreadsheet for use during the analysis. Details of the article's contents were made as notes for each source, which were useful during synthesis and analysis. The article used Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis as a methodology that facilitated the analysis and interrogation of the manifestations of neoliberalism as evidenced in the selected 58 sources. The critical discourse analysis was premised on the following steps: definition of the research aim, which guided the selection of relevant sources for the purpose of this research, gathering social and historical contexts regarding neoliberalism in higher education, coding of the emergent patterns and themes from the articles studied for the purpose of this article, and a review or analysis of the patterns, which emerged from the coded categories of data (Fairclough 2013) through the decolonial lens. The data were coded according to the following categories: evolution of neoliberalism, neoliberal traits in education, neoliberalism in South African higher education language policy and decolonial insights on neoliberalism in South African higher education language policy. Using the critical discourse analysis as already alluded to, the coded data from the 58 sources were analysed according to the following categories: neoliberalism and higher education, neoliberalism in post-apartheid South African higher education language policy and neoliberal assumptions in South African higher

education language policy through a decolonial lens. The decolonial perspective premised on concepts such as coloniality of being, power and knowledge was used to critique the neoliberal manifestations in South African higher education language policy directives to open a window through which the present and future neoliberal African universities could be envisioned. The article then provided some insights on reclaiming linguistic parity in a neoliberalised African university.

Neoliberalism and higher education

Historically, neoliberalism is an offshoot of classical liberalism, the liberal political and economic theory of the 19th century, which foregrounds and emphasises the human being as free to accumulate wealth. The Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) which was founded by an Austrian scholar, Friedrich August von Hayek, Frank Knight, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises, George Stigler and Milton Friedman in 1947 formulated the neoliberal economic principles (García 2019; Mignolo 2011). Koopman (2019) professes that Hayek's economic theory underpinned the price mechanisms to synchronise personal knowledge without the interference of the government. However, the 19th-century economic theoretical ideas lost touch towards the end of the century, leading to another level or 'new liberalism' currently known as neoliberalism and was popularised between 1970s and 1980s by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (Van Der Walt 2017), which then spread across the world. Literature confirms that since the 1980s, the use of 'neoliberalism' has expanded in the diverse disciplinary and theoretical contexts where it has been used (Akala 2021). Motta and Bennett (2018:634) refer to it as some 'forms of behaving and embodying space that are empowered and legitimised, whilst others are delimited, disciplined and subjected to the dominant logics'. Neoliberal critics describe the phenomenon as a slippery and nuanced concept (Laruelle 2024), and its meaning differs and changes depending on particular contexts.

The ways in which the neoliberal project spread include the international agencies including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) which have facilitated the spread of neoliberal principles to developing nations. For instance, between the 1980s and 1990s, many African universities were compelled to adopt neoliberal policies premised on corporatisation, marketisation and consumerism principles without differentiation. South Africa has responded by adopting neoliberal ideas from the Global North through practices such as fiscal management, strategic and key result management, and rankings (Chipindi & Daka 2022; Hlatshwayo 2022). The theory also postulates monetarism and public choice (Chipindi & Daka 2022). In its vagueness and elusive nature, it operates in daily lives, but has more discernible elements in domains such as business, economy, government, personal lives and also education (Shenk 2015; Van Der Walt 2017).

The neoliberal thought is centred on the idea of the free market (Zajda & Rust 2021) in which the market plays the role of the regulator and distributer of opportunities and resources (Chipindi & Daka 2022). It has stealthily penetrated making people increasingly captive to the logic that education and life should be run along entrepreneurial terms for efficiency's sake; thus, as posited by some scholars, it eventually colonises minds and consciousness (Ball 2016; Sims 2019). Literature confirms that since the 1980s, the use of 'neoliberalism' has expanded in the diverse disciplinary and theoretical contexts where it has been adopted (Akala 2021). Neoliberal critics describe the phenomenon as characterised by nuances that make its meaning to continue changing as context permits (Rossouw & Goldman 2023; Sims 2019). As a result, higher education institutions have become sites of neoliberal trends. In this article, the author illuminates the concept of neoliberalism as a structural management enforcement meant to reorganise and recalibrate domains of life, including education, to become an entrepreneurial enterprise that seeks to fulfil international and global imperatives at the expense of local needs.

There is neoliberalism rooted in the hegemonic principles that dictate upon teaching and learning practices and marketplace policies (García 2019; Quijano 2000), which bolster hierarchies of knowledge (García 2019; Mignolo 2011). Unfortunately, such hierarchies have detrimental effects on those who are marginalised, thus peripheralising their knowledges (García 2019). Literature claims that since the inception of neoliberalism in education, knowledge production has been closely linked to imperial interests, shaping the criteria of what counts as valid academic knowledge and who should produce it (Munyaradzi 2022).

In that regard, neoliberal market principles kick out the government from the system and dub it unqualified to impose restrictions on private business enterprises. The unremarkable changes have triggered debates on whether the African universities should play instrumental roles to fulfil the neoliberal market needs (Brown 2015; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2018) or to enhance the function of education for the public good of its citizenry.

Neoliberal thinkers subscribe to the thinking that although education is expected to work in spaces regulated by the state, the state has failed to regulate education (Rustin 2016); hence, education should be made more cost-effective by adopting principles that commodify knowledge, and disempower and deskill those who teach by focusing on quality improvement based on rankings (Ball 2016; Van Der Walt 2017). The neoliberal thought guides policy formulation. For example, in South Africa, the *Higher Education Act of 1997* envisages a South African education system that can produce a citizenry that contributes to global economic imperatives. Higher education sees the manifestation of the neoliberal thought through institutional audit culture in which academics' achievement is quantified as scores (Makuvaza & Shizha 2017). For example, succeeding to publish one

research output means an academic obtains a point. Also important is the number of postgraduate students at Master's degree or doctoral levels an academic has successfully supervised to completion. It is from high scoring in the audit that one gets promoted as evidence of having satisfied the performance management criteria. The workload has drastically increased for lecturers and that has a detrimental effect to their other responsibilities such as teaching, research and community engagement.

International institutions such as the IMF, WB (Price 2014) and WTO perceive English competence as indispensable evidence of whether a particular nation is a lucrative destination for business. National and institutional policies that valorise English become compulsory, leading to the commodification of language as a valuable cultural capital.

Subsequently, educational institutions compete to acquire government funding to provide the education that the national statutory frameworks require. English as primary medium policies become the gatekeepers to both access to education and employment markets (Price 2014; Roussouw & Goldman 2023); thus, the neoliberal idea of English for all becomes almost imperative. Neoliberal dynamics render resistance inherently hard, as the principles subtly normalise the dominant logic as indisputable common sense. However, from a humanist perspective, the 'indisputable common sense' may be regarded as untenable especially in the 21st century in that antineoliberal thinkers advance that there are heterogeneous worldviews which should be valued as equally relevant.

Neoliberalism in language policy reforms in post-apartheid South African higher education

The article foregrounds neoliberal tendencies in South African higher education in relation to transformation of pedagogy with reference to its language policy directives.

In 2012, an initiative was made to determine the development of African languages as intellectual languages in higher education. A report based on the findings of the advisory committee in this regard highlighted that very little progress had been made in promoting the development and potential of African languages to enhance access and success in South African higher education (DHET 2015). To address that gap, the DHET (2020) reviewed the LPHE determined in terms of section 27(2) of *the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997* (as amended):

> [*T*]o provide a framework for the development and strengthening of indigenous languages as languages of scholarship, teaching and learning and communication at South African public higher education institutions, in particular, universities. (p. 15)

It is commendable that the policy categorically states that all official internal institutional communication must be in at least two official languages other than English, to cultivate and develop a multilingual culture to promote the use of indigenous African languages (DHET 2020:15).

Although the policy attempts to challenge the limited growth and use of African languages, it does so 'whilst simultaneously sustaining the standard and utilisation of languages that are already developed' (DHET 2020:5). I draw the reader's attention to the function of the policy as similar to that of university vision statements which fulfil a 'telling and selling' function (Fairclough 2010:184). Such a function of language informs the customers such as university staff, students and other interested stakeholders of the policy's internationalisation project and its approval to sustain the already established languages, in this case English and to some extent, Afrikaans. The telling and selling function illuminates the ways in which the language policy declares its public multilingual vision for equitable access to education. It subtly reveals the neoliberal mandate to promote internationalisation of teaching and learning by sustaining and recognising the 'de facto status of English as the medium engagement in learning and teaching in South African higher education institutions' (DHET 2020:15). The insistence on English as the primary medium of teaching and learning at South African universities threatens the right of the majority of black students to receive tuition through the media of their first languages, a right enjoyed by English native students. Undermining the right to learn through the medium of first language makes learning difficult for the majority of black students, especially those from under-resourced rural areas where exposure to English is limited.

From a neoliberal logic, educational policies such as curriculum and language frameworks should be investment-based because education is a central indicator of future economic growth and people's well-being (Ball 2016). For example, although 10 indigenous South African languages are declared as official languages, English enjoys the prestige as the primary medium of teaching, learning and research as evidenced by the recently published LPHE that universities in South Africa have not made strides in advancing indigenous languages (DHET 2020). Thus, English still plays the gatekeeping role in South African higher education, as well as in other higher education contexts in Anglophone countries such as Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Lesotho, to mention a few, at the expense of indigenous African languages. Thus, there are subtle neoliberal orientations in the policy directives to keep languages as separated, hierarchical entities which systems in education use for profiteering purpose (Canagarajah 2017). The multilingual turn that South African higher education language policy directives have adopted has pushed translingual theorists to critique neoliberal central constructs in language studies such as language acquisition, competence and efficiency (Ndhlovu & Makalela 2021). Although multilingualism has triggered a favourable turn towards inclusive communicative policies at institutions and societies, scholars such as Canagarajah (2017) and Kubota (2014) warn that the move might merely serve the neoliberal interests. In prioritising English as the primary medium of teaching and learning, and treating African languages as scaffolding tools, the South African higher education language policy directives essentially market

social reproduction (ed. Bourdieu 1991; Phillipson 2018) of English linguistic capital which, if possessed by students, will see them making progressive mobility strides into better prospects in their lives as well as in their future career prospects. Not possessing the expected English linguistic capital worsens opportunities for access to education to minoritised students from linguistically disadvantaged backgrounds, while promoting whiteness for students who use English as their home language, hence widening the divide between the rich and the poor. The approaches to language policies should be contextualised in the lived experiences of the people which the policies impact (Pennycook & Makoni 2022). Language policy framing and philosophical orientations should be grounded on what Flores and Chapparo (2018) refer to as broader 'notions of what counts as language education policy to include racial and economic issues that impact the lives of language-minoritised communities' (2018:366–367).

Notwithstanding the progressive move by the South African higher education language policy frameworks to promote indigenous languages, this article is in tandem with the discourses that critique the limitations of South African policy frameworks and directives that are more focused on implementation at the expense of making critical analyses of the policy documents to rectify the missing link (Kaschula & Maseko 2014) so that English hegemony, which is entangled with privilege and class, is disrupted.

Although English may be considered as a lingua franca that facilitates and enables the internationalisation of higher education, this article argues that stakeholders in the language policy formulation at national and institutional levels should appreciate that language is central to knowledge acquisition and sharing. As such, optimal teaching and learning processes bid policymakers, implementers and students to collectively use innovative ways to maximise students' learning experiences. If the ultimate objective of teaching is to impart knowledge to students, then the language of instruction should not be an impediment. Linguistic diversity through such emancipatory approaches such as multilingual education and translanguaging for improved performance and throughput rates could be the way to go.

Neoliberal assumptions in language policy through a decolonial lens

Decolonial theory can be summed up as resistance, thought and movement premised on the imperative to free the 'othered' peoples of the Global South from coloniality of power, knowledge and being. As a methodology and epistemological tool, decoloniality deconstructs and unsettles the taken-for-granted global ethnoracial and linguistic hierarchisation (Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2000), which seeks to redress the colonial wound from the mythologised Western world culture and languages following the end of colonial rule and attainment of independence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Sibanda 2019). By rejecting Westernised objectivity and rigid worldviews, decolonial thinking provincialises Eurocentric knowledge and shifts the geography of reason to centre African thought systems and philosophies as equally relevant. The decolonial thinking progressively addresses issues of coloniality of being, knowledge and power.

Coloniality of being, knowledge and power

Coloniality of being is the manifestation of the lived experiences of colonisation, which persist beyond territorial colonisation. That experience, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argued, illuminates how white supremacy ideology continues to gain ontological muscles while black people continue to be pushed into the zone of subhumans. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Chinweizu (1985) associate coloniality of being with objectification, thingification and commodification of Africans by the West. One cannot deal with the challenges of neoliberalism in the academy without considering the historically constituted system within which the binaries of whiteness and zone of nonbeing continue to be reproduced, with language being a key factor.

Coloniality of knowledge mirrors 'the impact of colonisation on the production, structure and sharing of knowledge' (Maldonado-Torres 2007:242). In the same vein, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:10) understands coloniality of knowledge as centred on epistemological issues, politics of knowledge generation and the questions of who generates which knowledge and for what purpose, which explains why certain forms of knowledge (e.g. endogenous and indigenous knowledges) are pushed aside to the margins of society or reconstituted to serve the purpose of global social domination.

Efforts in the education sector to deconstruct coloniality of knowledge are impeded by the adherence of stakeholders such as political leadership, parents and teachers to Eurocentric worldviews. Those who teach and influence in the education system are products of Eurocentric epistemology and worldviews, which are passed on to generations (Wa Thiong'o 1994).

In the South African higher education context, the coloniality of knowledge in the language question is illuminated through overemphasis of 'whiteness in which black voices are deafened' (Suarez-Krabbe 2017:62). By silencing their linguistic repertoires as only important for scaffolding purposes, while English enjoys the prestige of being used as the de facto language of teaching, learning and research.

The decolonial thought recognises that Africa is still suffering from coloniality of knowledge because it is still burdened with irrelevant foreign languages, cultures and ways of knowing which seek to neglect and delete endogenous and indigenous knowledge and languages (Shizha & Abdi 2014). Thus peripheralising other cultures and knowledges, relegating them as uncivilised and backward (Mignolo 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015).

Arguably, the South African higher education post-apartheid language policy and related legislative framework directives made a progressive move by outlining the need to recognise, use and develop indigenous languages as intellectual tools to challenge and dismantle the Eurocentric knowledge perpetuated by the hegemony of English as the language of engagement. However, the use of indigenous languages is not adequately supported for knowledge creation and sharing, especially in science (Ndhlovu & Makalela 2021). Adopting the English language policy produces students who are proficient in the Eurocentric intellectual culture while they look down upon their own (Munyaradzi 2022). In view of these observations, this article maintains that when students transmit and receive knowledge through the English medium, they promote the English culture. There is intersectionality among market fundamentalism, neoliberal logic and coloniality of power and language. The colonial matrix of power illuminates the deeply rooted coloniality in knowledge, power, language and ontological bodies that continue to persist after the demise of formalised colonisation (Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo 2007). The colonial matrix of power continues to influence how people think and engage with Western worldviews and philosophies by accepting binaries such as black and white and English hegemony and inferiority of African languages as normal.

Wa Thiong'o (1994) observes that language and power are inseparable, an observation that aptly illuminates how the South African higher education language policy fits into 'the global cartography of power and bifurcation' (Sibanda 2019:7). The country's higher education language policy could be understood as maintaining and promoting the global matrices of power structures to keep the powerless subjugated; for example, students whose home language is not English are compelled to learn through the primary medium of a colonial language such as English or Afrikaans. Conspicuously, the language hierarchy in the policy illuminates the racially and linguistically hierarchised structure of the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Quijano 2000; Wa Thiong'o 2009). English plays a pivotal role in the creation of class differences to maintain and sustain global power which, as Sibanda (2019) argues, dictates how the modern world operates. In the main, English dominance and hegemony exacerbate inequalities in access to education because choices for opportunities are disproportionately available to the few who have high levels of cultural, social and economic capitals (Bourdieu 1986). Victims suffer from marginalisation and stigma. What then could be done to address the language challenge and the typical neoliberal African university of tomorrow?

Towards reclaiming linguistic parity in neoliberal African university

In trying to answer the prompting question raised earlier, the article illuminates that neoliberal principles in the African higher education language policy ushered in the deletion of the role of the university as a public good. By institutionalising English as a primary language of teaching and learning and African languages as scaffolding tools, South African higher education has abandoned its allegiance to the public. The article submits to insights by scholars such as Mamdani (2007) and Akala (2021) that there is a need for the African university to shift to its position as an institution for the public good by adopting an African for Africa stance to allow the inculcation of African values in higher education. In tandem with Mamdani's views and following Mazrui (2003:153), a university which considers itself African needs to reposition itself by moving 'from a multinational corporation to a multicultural corporation'. That would promote the ubuntu philosophy which recognises diversity and linguistic parity (Akala 2021; Ndhlovu & Makalela 2021). The article further advances that a decolonised discourse premised on deconstructing coloniality of being, knowledge, language and power should be adopted by policymakers and implementers, especially at institutional levels, so that universities practically implement African languages as media of teaching and learning more meaningfully. The efficacy of an African higher education in this regard could be realised if Africa formulates and implements equitable language policies, among others, which embrace linguistic parity. It would also seek to promote critical academics who can vehemently challenge and interrogate negative neoliberal orientations which have muted academics whose knowledge, subjectivity and research have been privatised and commodified. For such an agenda to be realised, governments and higher education institutions should shift from their current neoliberal philosophical ideologies by embracing the traditional concept of the university as a public good (Akala 2021; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2018). However, it is easier said than done. It has to be highlighted that university administrators, academic staff and national leaders in Africa are largely products of Euro-American scientific orientations that nurtured them, thus making it very difficult for them to stop mimicking Westernised philosophies in the institutions they lead.

Conclusion

The discourse of neoliberalism in the language policy directives has, to some extent, exacerbated marginalisation of students who learn through a second language, thus making access to higher education difficult. That has entrenched linguistic imperialism and language hegemony in teaching and learning, which is detrimental to student achievement and throughput rates. This article submits to the argument that neoliberal hegemonic principles that function through the education domain facilitate the creation and promotion of hierarchies and power dynamics, which determine whose knowledge is legitimate and how it should be produced and brought to the people. The universities in Africa are deeply entrenched in neoliberal, neocolonial linguistic and hegemonic hierarchisation, which preserves injustices through provision of tuition in Western languages. Although South Africa is a democratic country, its higher education sector is riddled with neoliberal inequalities which exacerbate access to education.

Emerging from a segregated, apartheid and colonial regime, South African higher education continues to grapple with the imperative to democratise, while attending to the demands of internationalisation, globalisation and marketisation. Ideally, by succumbing to global pressure in its language policy, South African higher education unfortunately disrupted the essence of transformation of teaching and learning by adopting the neoliberal principle of English medium policy. This then limits access to equal opportunities to students who grapple with English, thereby playing a role in producing and sharing knowledge and skills that are required by global demands at the expense of local realities that demand centring African languages, cultures and modes of knowing. For a sustainable future of the African university, counter penetration in which Africans make the initiative to theorise and construct new paradigms for African development is required so that the African university curriculum, language policies and institutionalised cultures are grounded in the local cultures and allow for the inclusion of African cultural content. The stakeholders such as Council on Higher Education, DHET, the government, university leadership and academics, among others, could deal with the problems of neoliberalism in the language policy in higher education. By unsettling and deconstructing the historically constituted system within which the binaries of whiteness and zone of nonbeing continue being produced, with language being a key determinant.

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J.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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