**Research Project Proposal**

**Advancing Multilingualism in the Online Writing Centre**

**Background**

Despite the tenets of non-racialism being enshrined in the constitution of South Africa, which also stipulates that in recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages, institutions of higher education in SA have remained predominantly monolingual. In fact, today at least 18 of the country’s 23 universities use only English in this function, with at least two of the universities which formerly used mainly Afrikaans as languages of teaching and learning (LoLT), using more English than Afrikaans for learning and teaching purposes (Webb, 2012). Webb (2012) rightly declares that this increased *Englishification* of South African Universities (SAUs) means that they are not contributing significantly to the country’s constitutional commitment to pluralism, and the development of a nationally integrated society characterised by equity and parity of esteem between the major constituting language and cultural groups, and that the (nine official) African languages are not being developed into fully-fledged standard varieties and are not languages of high-function formal contexts.

This drive towards monolingualism is also at odds with the everchanging landscape of the SA higher education classroom. Globalization, political unrest, health, and economic pressures have increased the national and international movement of people. This has resulted in the world’s population becoming increasingly multilingual (Klapwijk & Van der Walt, 2016). Lin (2019) defines a multilingual as a person who can speak or understand more than one language. Multilingual individuals have always used different languages together for communication purposes. The term "translanguaging" was coined in the 1980s by Cen Williams (applied in Welsh as *trawsieithu*) in his unpublished thesis titled “*An Evaluation of Teaching and Learning Methods in the Context of Bilingual Secondary Education*.” However, the use of the term, and of the related concept, gained traction decades later due in part to published research by [Ofelia García](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ofelia_Garc%C3%ADa_(educator)), among others. The term *‘trawsieithu’* (Li & Lin, 2019) was used to describe the process in which these bilingual students would read or hear in one language (for example Sepedi) and then write or speak about what they would have read or heard in another (for example English, or vice versa). Colin Baker then translated the term *‘trawsieithu’* into English as ‘translanguaging’ (see Lewis et.al, 2013). Translanguaging is an extension of the concept of *[languaging](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Languaging&action=edit&redlink=1" \o "Languaging (page does not exist))*, the practices of language speakers, but with the additional feature of using multiple languages, often simultaneously (Garcia, 2009). It is a dynamic process in which multilingual speakers navigate complex social and cognitive demands through strategic employment of multiple languages (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Multiligualsm and the process of translanguaging has significant implications on the SA higher education classroom, especially as the majority of students in SAUs are second, third and fourth language speakers of English. A number of studies have highlighted the need for SAUs to adopt multilingual approached in their teaching and learning (Madiba, 2010; Webb, 2012; van der Walt 2004; Webb 2007; Du Plessis 2006; Verhoef 2007), this because there is sufficient evidence both nationally and internally of the pedagogical benefits of multilingualism.

**Pedagogical implications of multilingualism**

Rajendram (2021) conducted research in a Grade 5 Malaysian classroom where the teacher strictly enforced an English only policy. Despite this the teacher observed that students continued to use languages other than English in class, mostly when they were interacting with their peers during small group activities. As part of this research, consent was sought to observe and record the learners’ group interactions in order to study the reasons for their use of translanguaging in this manner, and its potential affordances in their learning (2021:5). The research confirmed that collaborative learning provides a supportive space for learners’ language practices to thrive relationally through translanguaging (20). Rajendram (2021:20) found that in small groups where multiple languages were used copiously by all group members, learners felt empowered to exercise their agency in translanguaging for the purposes of supporting one another’s language learning, building rapport, resolving conflict, asserting their culture and identity, and drawing on their knowledge and abilities across the named languages in their repertoire. She states further that compared to the groups where there was a joint translanguaging space, learners in groups where an English-only policy was enforced by a peer could not as easily make use of their cognitive, linguistic and semiotic resources in the context of their collaborative tasks (21). Aoyama (2019) examined advanced Japanese high school students’ use of and perceptions toward L1 (Japanese) in translanguaging during communicative L2 (English) activities. The quantitative survey results indicated that all the students partially used L1 during the communicative L2 activities to varying degrees (12). Classroom observations, revealed the students’ nuanced use of L1 for various purposes during the communicative tasks, which was classified as (a) fillers, (b) backchannelling, (c) asking for help, (d) equivalents, and (f) metalanguage (12). Through using these speech functions, the observed students showcased their ability to leverage their linguistic resources in their language system (12). The classroom observations and interviews revealed that students also used L1 to give explanations about L2 words and phrases they thought would be difficult for their peers (12). Closer to home, Ngubane, Ntombela and Govender (2020) explored the usefulness of translanguaging practices in teaching writing to English First Additional Language, Further Education and Training (FET) learners in South Africa. Their findings suggest that bilingual teachers creatively employed translanguaging practices for pedagogical and pastoral purposes. In situations where the integration of isiZulu and English better explained writing concepts, translanguaging was found to enhance learners’ cognition of the writing concepts and to stimulate active participation in the learning of writing. The findings also suggest that translanguaging is a useful learning resource in multilingual contexts where the use of English only is an obstacle to effective learning. Finally, translanguaging recognises values and respects languages that bilingual learners bring to the school from home, and this restores learners’ identity (142). Mbirimi-Hungwe (2016;2020) in her research too confirms that when students are allowed to utilize their full linguistic repertoires through translanguaging, they comprehend texts better than when a monolingual bias towards English is used in the classrooms. A number of other studies conducted at institutions of higher learning in the South African context confirm the advantages of, or appeal to allow students’ repertoires to enter the classroom discourse (Hurst & Mona 2017).

The pedagogical and cognitive benefits of multilingualism and translanguaging cannot be denied. Evident too is that despite monolingual policies, teachers, lecturers and students can within the confines of their classrooms exploit the benefits of this practice. The collaborative acts that advance multilingualism implies that it can be applied extensively in the context of a writing centre.

**Multilingualism in the writing centre**

The very nature and structure of a writing centre endorses collaboration. Importantly, because writing centres promote themselves as safe and non-judgemental spaces (Rambiritch, 2018), spaces where students can seek support about their (academic) writing without fear of judgement and reprisal, writing centres are the ideal environment to advance multilingualism. This, despite, or in spite of being support structures within a largely monolingual environment. Olson (2013) contends that the writing centre can provide a sense of community and belonging within the larger university, which can often feel strange and impersonal, particularly for multilingual writers. Additionally, he maintains that the writing center has the potential to work towards changing the conditions that cause writers to feel displaced (Olson 2013) and that we can take a “leadership role” in the writing center when we reconsider and adopt “a more multicultural and multilingual worldview” in our work with multilingual writers (1). Wang-Hiles (2020) questions the authority of English-only tutoring pedagogy and explores the possibility of employing multilingual writers’ L1 in tutorials from both multilingual writers’ and multilingual tutors’ perspectives. He advances his view of see[ing] difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading and listening” (p. 303) and in “view[ing] language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed and utilized” (p. 304). His research showed that multilingual writers preferred to work with those tutors who could engage in meaning making in shared languages other than English and that multilingual writers benefit from multilingual tutoring at all levels in a number of ways, affirming the need for multilingual tutoring service at writing centres. Bailey’s (2016) study, conducted at a local writing centre asks some pertinent questions. Amongst these are the issues related to language and power and its implications in the writing centre - a monolingual writing centre within a monolingual institution simply reinforces the dominant culture of the institution through language oppression. Instead, writing centres should strive to be sites of social justice, willing to take the risk and test linguistic boundaries.

Local writing centres, like their international counterparts advocate strongly for a multilingual turn in writing centres. Archer (2010) appealed for writing centres to approach their work from an academic literacies perspective, which it was argued, had an epistemology of “literacy as social practice” and a transformative ideology (Lillis and Scott 2007:14). Nichols (2017:191) shared how in a feedback session of a writing intensive initiative for social work first years, students wept as they explained to their writing fellow tutor their assumption that their home languages and cultures had no connection to what they believed to be the cast-iron institutional requirements of standard academic English. Her warning is that writing centres should sooner rather than later employ a pedagogy of transition and transformation (192). Daniels and Richards (2017) reflects on the Stellenbosch University Writing Lab’s pedagogical approach to multilingualism and inclusivity within the complex and political nature of multilingual language policies at a South African university. Seeing the writing lab as a contact zone, a space where different languages and cultures intersect means that issues of language equity and language equality must be confronted to enable members to participate fully in the activities of the writing lab. Such a lab would also be visible evidence of the University’s intention to adopt more student-centred pedagogies and to position itself as “a language-friendly university, with a responsive and flexible approach to language of instruction” (SU 2000:19). While numerous studies have promoted the idea of a multilingual writing centre, and there is no shortage of research in that regard, much of the research remains political and philosophical with little to no evidence of how to apply this practically within the confines of a writing centre. This research hopes to make a contribution in that regard.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

This study is underpinned by socio-constructivist theories of learning and the principles of critical pedagogy and social justice.

Socio-constructivist learning theories are based on the belief that learning and knowledge is socially constructed - that learning happens best when students are interacting with each other. The idea of learning during such interactions, or collaborative learning (Brufee) has its roots in the work of Vygotsky‘s sociocultural theory (SCT) and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; Van der Stuyf, 2002; Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012). In SCT human cognition and learning do not take place in isolation, but rather occur “through participation in social or culturally embedded experiences” (Raymond, 2000:176). Social interaction, with a knowledgeable other, is thus an important part of the learning process. While the term scaffolding was coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) it has almost always been associated with Vygotskian socio-cultural theory. And within this framework lies Vygotsky’s construct of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the ‘backbone of SCT (Obeiah & Bataineh, 2015:107).

The ZPD is defined as “the distance between actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978: 86); as “the space between the child’s level of independent performance and the child’s level of maximally assisted performance” (Bodrova & Leong, 1998) or as “the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance” (Raymond, 2000:176 quoted in Van der Stuyf, 2002:2). This region for immediate potential for cognitive growth between the upper (what the student can accomplish with the help of a more knowledgeable other) and lower (what the student can accomplish independently) limits is the ZPD. It must be noted here, however, that while the concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding are often conflated, this should not be these case. Benko (2012-13) points out that while the ZPD is that distance between individual and supported action achievable, scaffolding is the metaphor used to describe forms of instruction that allow students to move past their ZPD.  The ZPD is therefore of particular interest for writing centre practitioners for it is in this space/region that writing centre consultants can most effectively support students to reach their upper limits. For Vygotsky it was particularly important that, with reference to writing, the writing be necessary and relevant for life; for writing centre practitioners and students visiting us the texts they bring and the writing they are expected to engage in is highly relevant to their discipline and their academic success; For Vygotsky social interaction was crucial to learning, that intellectual development occurs when speech and practical activity converge”  (Vygotsky, 24); for writing centre practitioners the practical activity of text composition and dialogue (speech) about this very activity between a more knowledgeable peer and the student is the very essence of a writing centre. For Vygotsky the aim of such teaching and learning is that it creates a change in the student. The learning that takes place through the medium or speech/dialogue is internalized by the student, who uses past and present knowledge to start an internal conversation, a conversation with oneself evidencing the learning or growth that has happened, and thus the movement towards the upper end of the ZPD. For writing centre practitioners our aim is to provide such writing support until the students develops into independent writers who no longer needs such support. Scaffolding in the ZPD is key to what we attempt to do in a writing centre.

Aligned with socio-constructivist theories of learning, this study will also foreground the principles inherent in the philosophy of critical pedagogy and social justice. Freire’s (1970) ideas have been the foundation on which critical pedagogy is based and has been instrumental in transforming the way educators think about and approach language teaching and learning. The real value of critical pedagogy lies in its aim to provide an education that is transformative, empowering, and student-centred. Freire (1970) advocated for dialogue as a key component in the classroom. He said that “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no real education” (1970, p. 74). For him, the banking concept of education resists dialogue while a problem-solving education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition, which unveils reality (Freire, 1970, p. 64). Clearly then, for critical pedagogists like Freire (1970), a truly just education system is one which, in the act of dialogue, encourages the asking and answering of questions through the process of critical thinking. This was confirmed by Aliakbari and Faraji (2011, p. 77) who stated that, through problem-posing education and questioning the problematic issues in learners’ lives, students learn to think critically and develop a critical consciousness that helps them to improve their life conditions and take the necessary actions to build a more just and equitable society. According to Freire (1970), social justice in education is allowing students to be inquirers, not containers; to present an education that encourages *dialogue*, *problem solving* and *critical thinking*. Thirty-five years later, thinking had not changed. Hackman (2005, p. 103) stated that social justice education encourages students to

*take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments; and that it includes student empowerment, the equitable distribution of resources, social responsibility, democracy, a student-centred focus, dialogue and an analysis of power.*

Similar principles were highlighted by Dover (2013), who stated that teaching for social justice draws most heavily from five conceptual and pedagogical philosophies: democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and social justice education. Within these five traditions aspects such as participatory pedagogy, problem solving, critical thinking, dialogue, inclusivity and holistic education are key.

The principals enshrined above, applied in the context of a writing centre, through the collaborative act of dialogue, provides the ideal opportunity to advance multilingualism, to create a learing environment where the students language repertoires are embraced as part of their identity as opposed to treating these as ‘other’. Such an environment, which appreciated and celebrates diversity is one in which effective teaching and learning can take place.

**The Research Project**

The research aims to determine the ways in which the writing centre can be transformed into a site that advances multilingualism. In light of the fact that this is not as aspect previously investigated or focus on with regards to the writing centre which is the focus of this study, this study will consider a number of different issues.

**The research aims to answer the following questions:**

1. What strategies can writing centre consultants exploit in advancing multilingualism during online writing centre consultations?
2. Can/How can metaphors be used to advance multilingualism during online writing centre consultations?
3. How effective are consultations conducted in a students’ L1 as opposed to a consultation in their L2?
4. **What are the implications of all our findings on tutor training?**

**The methods used to collect data are as follows:**

**Question 1**:

1. Qualitative content analysis of existing writing centre literature on strategies used by writing centre consultants;
2. Analysis of video recorded writing centre consultations/downloaded synchronous consultations via Blackboard Collaborate with a view to determine if consultants are using strategies to enhance multilingualism; determine which strategies can be used but are not being used by consultants; propose strategies that can successfully be used to advance multilingualism.

**Question 2**: Analysis of video recorded writing centre consultations/downloaded synchronous consultations via Blackboard Collaborate to determine if metaphors can be used to enhance multilingualism in a consultation between a monolingual consultant and a multilingual student.

**Question 3**:

1. Analysis of video recorded writing centre consultations/downloaded synchronous consultations via Blackboard Collaborate to determine how effective are consultations conducted in a students’ L1 as opposed to a consultation in their L2?
2. Administering questionnaires to student and consultant to determine perceptions and responses to both [types of] consultation.

**Question 4:** Drawing from all of the findings from Question 1-4, researchers should be able to provide a framework for training tutors to advance multilingualism during writing centre interactions.

**Value of this research**

At present the Humanities Writing Centre operates as a monolingual centre, offering writing centre consultations in English only, giving no consideration to the multi-language student body we serve. This is counter to the very ethos of what a writing centre should be. While there is a significant body of research on advancing multilingualism in our teaching and learning, and in the context of a writing centre, there is very little to no research investigating how the writing centre can practically contribute to this issue. As stated previously, research pertaining to this very issue remains political and theoretical, and while that is important to, what would be valuable for those of us on the ‘ground’ would be for us to be able to practically apply these principles to our teaching and the support we render in higher education (Rambiritch, 2018). This research hopes to make a contribution in this regard.

In addition to the **practical implementations** that this research will make possible (in the framework for tutor training that can then be used by other writing centres) and the **research outputs** (we estimate at least 6 research outputs) we also envision at least **two postgraduate studies emanating from this research**. At present we have one **Honours study** focused on Research Question 1. This study takes the form of an Extended Literature Review focused on multilingualism, second language acquisition and writing centre pedagogy. This literature review study will then form the basis for an **MA** focused on determining the strategies that can be used by writing centre consultants to advance multilingualism (Research Question 4).

***Institutional Description*:**

The writing centre which is the focus of this study has to date and in line with the Language Policy at its home institution (English as the primary language of instruction and assessment; Afrikaans to be maintained as a language of scholarship; development of Sepedi to a higher level of scientific discourse must be supported and resources), offers writing centre consultations in English only. This, despite the fact that the majority of our students who visit us, and our consultants, are L2 speakers. This is at odds with the mission, vision, and overall purpose of a writing centre, often marketed as a space for students’ and by students’, a safe space where students should be comfortable to talk about the academic writing (and often other) challenges they face. In attempting to enhance the use of multiple languages and multiple strategies to support the institutions linguistically diverse student body, this study, and its findings, once applied in/to the context of a writing centre can transform the centre from simply a safe space to a brave space.

***Key theorists***

**Socio-constructivism and Vygotsky** - Social interaction, with a knowledgeable other, is an important part of the learning process and is key to what we do the writing centre.

**Critical pedagogy** - Freire’s (1970) ideas have been the foundation on which critical pedagogy is based and has been instrumental in transforming the way educators think about and approach language teaching and learning. A move away from the banking concept of education to a student-centred approach that allows the opportunity for dialogue, debate and critical thinking.

**Social justice** - Rawls (1991) as a start but focus on Fraser (2005) - her multidimensional frame for social justice extended the basic definition of social justice to encompass parity of participation, that is, justice that requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. She stated, “Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction” (2005, p. 73). This would be the ideal—an understanding, acceptance, and application of a social justice system that sees and accepts all participants as equals.

**Ben Rafoth (**2015) - by drawing from the field of Second Language Acquisition to address challenges faced by multilingual students in a monolingual writing centre.

**Nancy Grimm** (2009) - her framework emphasises a writing centre in which multiple types of representation and channels of communication in combination with a diverse number of languages can exist - thus advocating for a ‘multiliteracies’ approach.

**Suresh Canagarajah** (2011) - the need to study language learning differently as compared to the past - a move away from monolingual orientations ‘that are not relevant to any communicative situation anywhere;.