

Unlocking academic success through translanguaging: Summary writing at a South African university

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Abstract

Summary writing is a core academic activity essential for success in higher education. Proficiency in this skill is crucial for students to perform various academic tasks. However, summary writing poses significant challenges for multilingual students in South Africa, particularly in contexts where monolingual practices prevail. This qualitative study investigates the impact of translanguaging on the summary writing skills of multilingual students at a South African university. Eight participants, who wrote summaries of an English text in English and their home languages, were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that translanguaging enhances comprehension and engagement with texts, as it allows students to use multiple languages freely. Consequently, this paper recommends implementing language policies that treat all languages equally and encourage the use of students' home languages as learning resources. Future research should focus on incorporating texts in multiple languages for reading and summary writing in literacy education.

Keywords: translanguaging, academic literacy, multilingualism, higher education, summary writing

Introduction

Translanguaging is increasingly recognised in language and literacy education (Anwaruddin, 2018; Liu, et al., 2022), capturing the interest of scholars and educators dedicated to multilingual education. Traditionally, higher education institutions worldwide have predominantly employed monolingual teaching approaches, which often disadvantage multilingual students. Consequently, there is a growing scholarly effort to adopt approaches that leverage the multiple languages students bring to the classroom, addressing the unique challenges they face in literacy learning, particularly in academic writing. The widespread use of English as the medium of instruction in universities globally has become standard practice, driven by reasons such as



international marketing and student recruitment (Dearden, 2014; Lasagabaster, 2022; Wilmot and McKenna, 2018). However, this practice often marginalises multilingual students, excluding them from the learning process.

Despite the growing recognition of translanguaging in language and literacy education, significant gaps remain in our understanding of its application in academic literacy within higher education. Current research often focuses on primary and secondary education, leaving a gap in the context of higher education where academic writing and literacy demands are more complex. Additionally, much of the existing literature does not fully explore how translanguaging can specifically benefit multilingual students in developing academic literacy skills, particularly in non-English dominant contexts. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining the implementation of translanguaging practices in higher education institutions and their impact on the academic literacy of multilingual students. By focusing on diverse linguistic backgrounds and real-world classroom settings, this research will provide empirical evidence on the efficacy of translanguaging in enhancing academic writing and literacy skills among multilingual students. Ultimately, we provide a foundation for future research by offering insights into best practices for integrating translanguaging into higher education curricula, as well as practical recommendations for educators and policy-makers to support multilingual students more effectively.

Translanguaging as a multilingual resource

Despite the dominance of monolingual orientations in educational settings, multilingual practices are becoming increasingly common due to the rise in language contact (Canagarajah, 2013). Recent scholarship challenges the strict separation of languages, suggesting that “language use is not strictly compartmentalised but fluid and mobile” (Kiramba, 2017). Terms like ‘flexible bilingualism’ (recognising that bilinguals use their languages fluidly without strictly following traditional language boundaries) (Creese and Blackledge, 2010), ‘heteroglossia’ (concept referring to multiple voices, or language varieties within a single text, discourse or social context) (Bailey, 2007), ‘code-meshing’ (the practice of blending multiple languages or linguistic varieties in a single piece of communication (Canagarajah, 2011), and ‘translanguaging’ (purposeful use of multiple languages for learning and communication) (García, 2009) have been used to describe this phenomenon, in which languages are interconnected (Ubuntu translanguaging) and not compartmentalised, with translanguaging emerging as a widely accepted term and the focus of this paper (Velasco and García, 2014). García (2009) further defines translanguaging as the use of ‘multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage to make sense of their bilingual worlds’. This is a natural, spontaneous and fluid process that multilingual speakers use. Thus, translanguaging encompasses normal communicative practices within bilingual or multilingual communities, serving as a descriptive label for bilingual discursive practices in academic and non-academic contexts (Kwon and Schallert, 2016; Sayer, 2013).

García’s (2009) concept of translanguaging suggests that bilingual individuals draw from a single language system to create meaning, rather than switching between separate languages

(Childs, 2016). Unlike code-switching, translanguaging does not recognise conventional language boundaries, allowing multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages fluidly (Canagarajah, 2011; García and Li, 2014; Hungwe, 2019; Makalela, 2015a). By viewing linguistic resources as an integrated system, translanguaging enables learners to fully utilise their linguistic repertoires (Velasco and García, 2014).

As a pedagogical practice, the term 'translanguaging', coined by Cen Williams in 1994, describes the planned and systematic use of two languages for teaching and learning within the same lesson (Baker, 2006). Initially formulated as a bilingual strategy to develop academic language, translanguaging allows learners to read a text in one language and discuss it in another (Sayer, 2013). This practice engages bilingual learners' home languages in the classroom, fostering positive learning experiences (García, 2009; Kwon and Schallert, 2016; Makalela, 2015a).

Translanguaging considers the funds of knowledge that L2 learners bring to the classroom (Moll, et al., 1992). It acknowledges that ESL learners do not come to literacy events empty-handed. Through translanguaging, multilinguals can select features of their linguistic repertoire in an integrated, flexible, and meaningful manner to gain knowledge, articulate thoughts, and communicate effectively (Lewis, et al., 2012; Velasco and García, 2014; Wei, 2011). This approach supports viewing language as a resource, empowering students to become more proficient in the medium of instruction (Carstens, 2016; Daniel and Pacheco, 2016).

Teachers can employ translanguaging by providing information in one language and allowing learners to reproduce it in another (Childs, 2016). This method can be affirming for bilingual learners, facilitating more effective learning and fostering confidence and dignity (Childs, 2016; Hurst and Mona, 2017). Adopting this approach promotes social justice by allowing learners to use languages of their choice, thereby ensuring their rights to learn and develop their home languages (Ngcobo, et al., 2016; Velasco and García, 2014).

Several scholars advocate translanguaging as a solution to the educational challenges faced by linguistically and culturally diverse learners (Canagarajah, 2011; 2013; Creese and Blackledge, 2008; García, 2009; García and Wei, 2014; Kramba, 2017; Lewis, et al., 2012). In South Africa, researchers such as Krause and Prinsloo (2016), Makalela (2015a; 2015b; 2016), and Ngcobo, et al. (2016) have focused on translanguaging. Despite resistance in classroom contexts (Palmer, et al., 2014), translanguaging offers a promising alternative to monolingual teaching practices. Institutional language ideologies often turn these translanguaging practices from assets into perceived disadvantages (Krause and Prinsloo, 2016). Nonetheless, normalising translanguaging in classrooms could enhance learning for bilingual learners (Canagarajah, 2011).

Translanguaging affordances in academic literacy and multilingual summary writing

Summary writing is a critical skill for academic success in higher education (De Silva, 2015; Lin and Maarof, 2013; Ngcobo, et al., 2016). Summarisation involves identifying the most critical content in a passage and expressing it succinctly in one's own words (Friend, 2001; Winograd, 1984). Zare, et al. (2023) add that summary writing aids reading comprehension and helps avoid plagiarism. Essentially, summarising is the ability to convey main points concisely, yet it remains

one of the most challenging skills for ESL students to acquire (Barkaoui, 2007; Choy and Lee, 2012; De Silva, 2015; Lin and Maarof, 2013). Firat et al. (2020) argue that summary writing is demanding because it requires both comprehension of the assigned text and proficient writing skills. Makalela (2004) emphasises that writing is the most complex skill to acquire in both first and second languages, and ESL students face deeper challenges compared to their peers. De Silva (2015) echoes this, stating that writing tasks become extremely challenging when the medium of writing is an L2. ESL students must both comprehend the source text and write the summary in a second language (Makalela, 2004).

Research indicates that ESL students often struggle to distinguish main ideas from supporting details in a source text (Chen and Su, 2012; Choy and Lee, 2012; Keck, 2014; Wichadee, 2013). For instance, Choy and Lee (2012) found that students had difficulties identifying main points and often copied from the original text. They also used repeated words or phrases as indicators of importance, which can be misleading. Wichadee (2013) revealed that ESL students often wrote inaccurate summaries with unimportant points and heavily copied text. Keck (2014) studied the summarisation practices of L1 and L2 writers among 76 undergraduate students and found that extensive copying occurred primarily among first-year L2 students. Their summaries consisted mostly of copied and pasted excerpts with minimal modification. However, experienced L2 writers employed more paraphrasing strategies, similar to those used by their L1 counterparts. Choy and Lee (2012) attribute one major challenge in summary writing for ESL students to their limited vocabulary in the target language, as they are forced to learn in a language different from their home languages.

Adopting a translanguaging approach can address these challenges by enabling students to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire in the classroom. Creating an environment where all languages can coexist effectively can facilitate the development of learning and literacy. Studies in South Africa have shown that translanguaging is effective for deep comprehension of content, which in turn helps them to write better summaries across various subjects (Charamba and Zano, 2019; Childs, 2016; Krause and Prinsloo, 2016; Madiba, 2014; Makalela, 2016; Van der Walt, et al., 2001). However, there is a paucity of research on how multilingual students interact with multiple languages and how that affects writing construction in higher education (Hungwe, 2019; Ngcobo, et al., 2016). This area has not received much attention due to monolingual assumptions that view literacy acquisition as a unidirectional process (Canagarajah, 2011; Kiramba, 2017). Current research often focuses on the cognitive aspects of writing and strategies for mastering these skills, overlooking the diverse linguistic resources that bilingual and multilingual learners bring to their texts.

Studies have shown that translanguaging can be a valuable strategy in the writing process, allowing students to draw from their entire linguistic repertoire to facilitate understanding, even when the goal is to produce writing in the target language (Canagarajah, 2011; Choy and Lee, 2012; Kiramba, 2017; Ngcobo, et al., 2016). Velasco and García (2014) argue that translanguaging in writing fosters higher standards of thought, creativity, and language use compared to monolingual writing. By utilising multiple languages in the classroom, students can enhance their

overall academic performance and develop proficiency in various languages. This approach also fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as it enables students to engage with content in more meaningful ways (Baker, 2006; Makalela, 2015b).

Furthermore, translanguaging enhances students' summarising and paraphrasing skills, as it encourages them to process information in multiple languages (Choy and Lee, 2012; Ngcobo et al., 2016). Besides fostering a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment, where all students feel valued and understood (Miller and Rowe, 2014; Souto-Manning and Felderman, 2013), translanguaging practices help students recognise the interconnectedness of languages and appreciate that no language is more important than another.

Ubuntu translanguaging

While translanguaging provides a powerful lens for understanding how multilingual individuals draw on their full linguistic repertoires, it is crucial to recognise that this practice is not culturally neutral (Prasatyo, et al., 2025). In African contexts, translanguaging is often intricately connected to cultural values, relational practices, and communal ways of knowing. This culturally embedded orientation has led to the emergence of ubuntu translanguaging, a concept that foregrounds the interdependence of language and collective ways of knowing (Makalela, 2016). The ubuntu philosophy is an African humanism and cultural pattern that values overlaps, continuity, and cross-overs between communities. Ubuntu finds expression in the mantra, 'I am because you are; you are because we are'. Ubuntu translanguaging describes the complex African multilingual practices, where languages are not complete on their own but are interconnected, and using notions of first language or mother tongue is inconceivable because, from the ubuntu focus on multilingual development, they do not exist (Makalela, 2019).

Ubuntu translanguaging, an extension of translanguaging in this study, provides insight into how multilingual students utilise all their languages in a manner that reflects who they are and where they come from. It creates space for students to express ideas in ways that feel natural and meaningful to them. Drawn from the African philosophy that students are familiar with, ubuntu translanguaging brings an awareness to students that no language is complete on its own, in the same way that they, as humans, need other people to 'become complete'. Languages also depend on each other to be complete. Exploring translanguaging and its extension, Ubuntu translanguaging in writing, specifically summary writing, is crucial in this study to understand how this approach can help multilingual learners engage meaningfully with academic texts. However, it is also critical to recognise that the success of a novel pedagogical practice in any learning space depends on how students perceive it. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to answer the following question: How do multilingual African students at a university of technology perceive the impact of translanguaging pedagogy on their writing of summaries?

The Study

This study presented here adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the use of translanguaging in the summary writing skills of eight students from a university of technology

in South Africa. The participants, aged between 19 and 21 years, were selected using a purposive sampling method. This method was chosen to ensure that the participants were speakers of multiple African languages, specifically IsiZulu, Sepedi, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda, which are among the local African languages spoken in South Africa. The selected participants were all registered for a compulsory course in Applied Communication Skills, designed to develop communication skills and academic writing skills, preparing students for their future in the workplace. Summary writing is a key component of this course's academic writing activities.

Despite the institution's language policy, which acknowledges the parity of all South African languages, the university, located in an area dominated by Sesotho and Afrikaans, has primarily used English for teaching and learning. While plans are in place to incorporate multilingualism in the classroom by developing Sesotho and Afrikaans as languages of learning and teaching, English remains the dominant medium. Consequently, students typically only speak their home languages outside the classroom.

To collect data, the study utilised written summaries and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by the researcher, who also happened to be teaching the participants. Some of the questions in the interviews asked participants to describe their writing experiences in each of the two summaries and to express their thoughts on whether using multiple languages to write summaries improved their skill in summary writing. The participants were asked to write summaries in both English and their home languages. Specifically, they were required to write a 60-word summary of a given text. The process was as follows:

1. Each participant read an English text individually and produced a summary of that text in English.
2. Immediately following this, each participant wrote a summary of the exact text in their home language to avoid any discussion of the text between summary writing sessions. This exercise was also conducted individually.

The text was about cave paintings in the history of communication. This was the first instance where the participants used their home languages in a formal academic setting. To ensure that the participants were adequately prepared for the task, a brief discussion on summary writing skills was conducted to refresh their memories.

Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews aimed to capture the participants' experiences and perceptions of using their home languages in academic writing. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically to understand the participants' experiences with translanguaging. Themes such as ease of expression, confidence in using home languages, and perceived benefits or challenges of translanguaging in summary writing were explored. Semi-structured interviews offered rich, qualitative insights into the students' experiences.

Findings

The study aimed to investigate the use of translanguaging in the summary writing of students from a university of technology in South Africa. The findings highlight key aspects related to the effectiveness of translanguaging in academic writing, particularly in the context of multilingual learners.

Mental processes in summary writing: A translanguaging perspective

The interview data provided insights into the cognitive processes involved in summary writing for multilingual students. Rather than viewing these processes through a monolingual lens, the findings demonstrate how translanguaging facilitates meaning-making by allowing students to shuttle between languages as an epistemic resource. Instead of a cognitive burden, translanguaging operates as a meaning continuum that enables fluid engagement with academic texts. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1: 'In Zulu which is my language, I wrote as I think, like as I was thinking that is what I wrote. In my language, what to write was there in my mind so I write what's on my mind. But this was different in English because I have to read and re-read again to get the point.'

The participant's description reveals the natural cognitive flow of writing in their home language, where thinking and writing are seamlessly connected. In contrast, English presents an additional layer of effort, requiring multiple readings to extract meaning. This demonstrates how translanguaging allows learners to access thought directly in their most comfortable linguistic repertoire, reducing the cognitive strain imposed by a second language (L2).

Excerpt 2: 'When I read, I try to translate English to my language, and that's when I start to get the meaning of the text.'

This participant highlights the cognitive necessity of translanguaging as a bridge to comprehension. By translating English into their home language, the learner is not merely decoding words, but actively negotiating meaning across languages, demonstrating the central role of ubuntu translanguaging in deep learning.

These excerpts collectively show that multilingual students engage in dynamic cognitive processes when summarising texts. Translanguaging is not a remedial strategy, but an advanced mental process that enhances meaning construction. By moving between languages, students are able to conceptualise ideas more holistically, rather than passively consuming information in an unfamiliar linguistic code.

The findings align with Makalela's (2016; 2019; 2022) ubuntu translanguaging model, which challenges monolingual cognitive paradigms by showing that thinking is not language-bound, but rather exists in a fluid continuum of linguistic interdependence. The participant's ability to seamlessly move between thinking, reading, and writing in multiple languages affirms the

multiple identity positions inherent in multilingual learners where meaning is not contained within a single language, but emerges through dynamic translanguaging practices.

Enhanced comprehension through ubuntu translanguaging

A significant theme that emerged from the study is how ubuntu translanguaging fosters enhanced comprehension by allowing students to engage with texts through an interconnected web of meaning. The findings illustrate that meaning is not confined to one language, but is dynamically co-constructed across linguistic repertoires in an infinite relation of dependency – a meaning continuum where languages work together rather than in isolation.

Excerpt 3: ‘It is easier to express myself in Tsonga because I’m comfortable in the language, and I can understand better if I take the English text to my own language.’

This participant highlights how moving between languages enables deeper engagement with academic texts. Translanguaging serves as a cognitive scaffolding tool, allowing the learner to mediate meaning through Tsonga, reinforcing their understanding of the English source text.

Excerpt 4: ‘When I write a summary in my language, I am forced to understand what the English text is saying. This is different in English because when I don’t understand, I copy straight from the English text to my summary.’

This participant reveals how translanguaging fosters active meaning-making. Writing in their home language compels them to grasp and process the content fully, rather than resorting to rote copying in English when comprehension is incomplete. This reinforces the principle that understanding emerges in the process of meaning negotiation across languages.

Meaning continuum: Translanguaging as an epistemic resource

The excerpts demonstrate that translanguaging is not merely a translation exercise – it is an epistemic resource that facilitates deep meaning construction across linguistic repertoires. The act of moving between languages allows students to internalise concepts, process them at a deeper level, and articulate them more clearly in their own words. This continuum of meaning underscores ubuntu translanguaging where languages are not compartmentalised, but exist in relational interdependence.

Additionally, these findings affirm the multiple identity positions inherent in multilingual speakers. By engaging in translanguaging, students are not just learning content; they are also asserting and navigating their fluid linguistic and cultural identities. Their ability to shuttle between languages reflects their agency in constructing meaning without erasing any part of their linguistic selves. This finding aligns with Makalela’s (2016; 2019; 2022) ubuntu translanguaging model, which posits that multilingual speakers do not exist in rigid monolingual

silos, but instead engage in dynamic meaning-making practices that affirm their interconnected identities.

Thus, ubuntu translanguaging in summary writing is a powerful pedagogical approach that nurtures holistic comprehension, critical thinking, and deep engagement with academic texts. It affirms that linguistic resources do not exist in isolation, but work in infinite interconnected relations to enrich meaning-making and epistemic access (Makalela, 2016; 2019; 2022).

Enhancing summary writing through translanguaging

A key theme that emerged from the study was how students strategically used their linguistic resources across languages to improve their summary writing. Rather than viewing vocabulary as a limitation, participants demonstrated how translanguaging facilitated comprehension, synonym retrieval, and meaning-making. The excerpts below illustrate this theme.

Excerpt 5: 'In my home language, it is easy to get the synonyms when I write a summary. I know some of the words that are easy to use, but when I write an English summary, it is difficult to think of other words that mean the same as the ones in the passage, because I want to avoid copying. But now my English is not that deep, so I end up using the same words, and I don't get good marks because the lecturer said I was copying.'

The participant explains that finding synonyms in his home language is more intuitive than in English. This highlights how translanguaging could be used as a cognitive tool to support vocabulary expansion and paraphrasing skills in academic writing.

Excerpt 6: 'It's very much easier to summarise in my own language because that's my language, I can speak it, and I can use the language well. I know English, but some of the words I don't know. My vocabulary is not very big. Sometimes I just run out of words.'

This participant highlights the ease of summarising in their home language due to familiarity and fluency. Their experience suggests that allowing students to engage with texts bilingually could help them process information more effectively.

Excerpt 7: 'I changed many of the English words in Tsonga because I'm comfortable in the language. When I change them to my language, I can get the meaning and getting other words that mean the same in my language becomes easier. In my language, I can get many words that can mean one thing, but not in English.'

The participant describes how translanguaging helped them deepen their understanding of the text by leveraging their home language for meaning-making and synonym retrieval. This underscores the role of translanguaging in expanding students' lexical flexibility.

These excerpts suggest that translinguaging serves as a cognitive and linguistic bridge in summary writing. Rather than simply struggling with English vocabulary, students used their full linguistic repertoire to think through meaning, find alternative expressions, and enhance their writing process.

By incorporating translinguaging strategies in summary writing, educators can help students develop cross-linguistic academic skills, such as paraphrasing, concept clarification, and vocabulary enrichment. This approach not only supports comprehension, but also affirms students' multilingual identities, recognising their home languages as valuable academic resources rather than obstacles.

Expanding academic vocabulary through translinguaging in summary writing

A significant finding from the study was the participants' reflections on the use of formal vocabulary in their home languages for academic writing. This theme is illustrated in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 8: 'Writing and speaking are different. Writing is quite difficult because here we are writing a summary in class, which is something formal, and to get some good formal words in my language is not easy. But then, when we speak mostly in my language, we don't use formal words, we use any words and some of them we cannot use in our writing here in class.'

The participant highlights the distinction between spoken and written language, noting that while informal spoken language comes naturally, adapting home language resources for academic writing requires additional strategies.

Excerpt 9: 'Some formal terms are difficult to find in my mother tongue, so it is better to stick to the English language. I think with our languages, no one ever knew that we were going to need them eskoleni so ngicabanga ukuthi usebenzisa ulimi lwakho ubona sengathi akusho ngokwanele' [at school, I used to think that when you are using your home language, you are not saying enough].'

This participant reflects on the evolving role of home languages in academic contexts and suggests that structured academic exposure to these languages would enhance their perceived adequacy for formal writing.

These excerpts suggest that while some participants found it easier to write summaries in their home languages, they also encountered challenges in accessing formal academic vocabulary. This highlights the need for structured support to develop academic lexicons in home languages, rather than viewing them as inherently insufficient.

The findings reinforce the value of translinguaging as an approach that allows students to strategically use all their linguistic resources in academic writing. Rather than defaulting to

English, students could be guided to expand their home language repertoire through structured translanguaging practices, such as comparative vocabulary development, collaborative writing, and bilingual glossaries.

By integrating translanguaging into academic writing instruction, educators can bridge the gap between informal and formal language use, fostering confidence in home languages as valid tools for academic expression.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated that translanguaging in summary writing offers numerous benefits to students, aligning with and expanding upon existing literature in translanguaging and literacy education.

Challenges in identifying main Ideas: A translanguaging perspective

The findings of this study confirm that multilingual students, particularly those with an African linguistic background, often experience challenges in identifying main ideas in academic texts. This difficulty is deeply rooted in epistemological and rhetorical differences between Western and African discourse structures. Western academic writing follows a linear, explicit, and hierarchical structure, where the topic sentence – often the main idea – appears at the beginning of a paragraph, guiding the reader through a predetermined sequence of arguments (Cummings, 2002; Kaplan, 1966). In contrast, African rhetorical traditions, particularly those embedded in orality-based epistemologies, tend to follow a spiral or circumlocutory pattern, where meaning unfolds progressively, often culminating towards the end of a discussion (Nkadameng and Makalela, 2023).

This finding aligns with circumlocution as a cultural construct, a principle described by Nkadameng and Makalela (2023), where indirect communication and inferencing are integral to meaning-making. Unlike English, where argument structures are deductive and rely on explicit textual cues, African languages and rhetorical styles are inductive, requiring readers to synthesise meaning contextually rather than extracting it directly from a fixed topic sentence. This epistemological divergence suggests that multilingual students are not necessarily struggling with summary writing, but are instead navigating competing discourse norms.

Confirming and extending the literature on writing pedagogies

The challenges identified in this study resonate with existing scholarship that critiques the dominance of Anglocentric writing norms in academic settings (Canagarajah, 2013; Makalela, 2022). Prior research has shown that multilingual students often find Western-style summary writing difficult – not because of cognitive limitations, but due to a mismatch between their lived communicative experiences and the dominant literacy practices expected in academic institutions (Makalela, 2018). However, while much of the literature critiques this epistemological incongruence, fewer studies explore pedagogical strategies that reconcile these competing traditions. This study contributes to the growing body of research that

foregrounds translanguaging as an epistemic resource in academic Writing (García and Li Wei, 2014; Nkadameng and Makalela, 2023).

Translanguaging enables students to engage with Western writing conventions without erasing their home language thought processes, thus acting as a cognitive and rhetorical bridge between different discursive traditions. Through translanguaging, students can first process texts using their native inferencing strategies and then gradually map these onto the linear structures expected in academic English. This aligns with Makalela's (2016; 2019; 2022) ubuntu translanguaging model, which emphasises that writing and reading should not be confined to monolingual norms, but should instead recognise and integrate multilingual cognitive processes in knowledge construction.

The direction of the field: Towards decolonial academic writing

The implications of these findings suggest a necessary shift in academic writing instruction towards a decolonial, translanguaging-informed pedagogy (Canagarajah, 2023; Pennycook, 2021). The persistence of Western rhetorical norms in multilingual classrooms disadvantages students whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds do not align with English academic conventions. The solution is not linguistic assimilation, but rather pedagogical adaptation – ensuring that multilingual students' meaning-making strategies are validated, incorporated, and refined within academic writing instruction.

In this regard, translanguaging emerges as a critical pedagogical strategy for rethinking academic writing beyond Eurocentric templates. Rather than forcing multilingual students to conform to English-centric discourse structures, translanguaging allows for an epistemic convergence where both African and Western rhetorical traditions inform academic writing. Future research should explore how translanguaging-based writing interventions can scaffold students' ability to engage with multiple discourse conventions while maintaining their own epistemological integrity (García, et al., 2017; Nkadameng and Makalela, 2023).

By centering translanguaging in academic writing pedagogy, the field moves toward a more equitable, inclusive, and contextually relevant model of literacy development – one that empowers multilingual students to draw from their full linguistic repertoires rather than suppressing them in favour of monolingual norms (Makalela, 2016; 2022).

Mental processes in summary writing: The cognitive role of translanguaging

This study confirms that summary writing in a second language (L2) is a highly complex cognitive task, requiring multilingual students to decode, interpret, and rearticulate information across linguistic boundaries. Participants reported that they often shuttled between English and their home languages to mediate meaning, first translating the text into their native language for comprehension before reconstructing it in English for their summaries. This process reflects what Canagarajah (2011; 2013) refers to as translanguaging as a writing mode, wherein multilingual learners strategically mobilise their full linguistic repertoire to facilitate meaning-making in academic writing.

Research on bilingual and multilingual education suggests that translanguaging provides cognitive support in L2 writing by reducing cognitive overload (Kiramba, 2017; Ngcobo, et al., 2016). Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011) emphasise that translanguaging acts as a cognitive scaffold, allowing L2 learners to conceptualise ideas first in their strongest linguistic repertoire before engaging in academic writing. This study aligns with these findings, demonstrating that multilingual students are not merely translating words, but actively engaging in a cross-linguistic cognitive process to deepen their understanding and articulate their ideas more effectively.

Furthermore, this finding resonates with sociocultural theories of writing, particularly Vygotskian perspectives, which argue that writing is fundamentally a process of meaning negotiation rather than simple language transfer (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). In this sense, translanguaging should not be seen as an intermediate or compensatory strategy, but rather as an advanced cognitive mechanism that allows multilingual students to construct meaning at deeper levels. Research by Ngcobo et al. (2016) and Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011) confirms that translanguaging enables learners to synthesise information more effectively and overcome the cognitive barriers typically associated with writing in an L2.

This study extends previous literature by highlighting the productive role of translanguaging in academic literacy development. The findings suggest that academic writing instruction should not only acknowledge but actively incorporate translanguaging as a pedagogical tool to enable multilingual students to engage in complex cognitive processes without suppressing their full linguistic potential. Future studies should further explore how translanguaging scaffolds different stages of the writing process, from idea generation to structuring and revision.

Enhanced comprehension: Translanguaging as a meaning-making resource

A key finding of this study is that summary writing in the home language facilitates deeper comprehension of English texts. Participants reported that expressing ideas in their native languages first allowed them to internalise concepts more effectively before writing their final summaries in English. This aligns with a growing body of research that positions translanguaging as an epistemic resource for meaning-making and comprehension (Carstens, 2016; Childs, 2016; Hungwe, 2019; Krause and Prinsloo, 2016; Makalela, 2016; Ngcobo, et al., 2016).

The study's findings concur with Ngcobo et al. (2016), who found that students who summarised texts in their home languages demonstrated deeper engagement and a more nuanced understanding of the material. Similarly, García and Kleifgen (2020) argue that translanguaging not only enhances comprehension, but also fosters critical metalinguistic awareness, allowing students to reflect on their linguistic choices and develop more sophisticated text processing strategies.

This aligns with Makalela's (2016) ubuntu translanguaging model, which views comprehension as a relational process that unfolds across languages. Rather than treating English and African languages as discrete linguistic systems, the study's findings reinforce the

idea that students construct meaning in a fluid continuum between languages. This challenges the monolingual bias in academic writing instruction, which assumes that English comprehension should take place entirely in English. Instead, the evidence suggests that translinguaging serves as an active learning strategy, allowing students to mediate complex academic concepts through their full linguistic repertoires.

The study also corroborates Carstens (2016) and Childs (2016), who found that multilingual students who were allowed to summarise texts in their home languages demonstrated better retention and deeper conceptual understanding than those restricted to writing in English. This underscores the pedagogical significance of translinguaging as an inclusive practice that validates multilingual learners' linguistic resources and enhances their engagement with academic texts.

Implications for the field

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of research advocating for translinguaging as a transformative pedagogical practice in multilingual education. While traditional approaches to academic writing position L2 writing as a deficit that requires remedial support, translinguaging reframes multilingualism as a cognitive and epistemic advantage. The ability to move flexibly across languages in academic writing should not be seen as a barrier but as a skill that enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and knowledge construction (Canagarajah, 2013; García and Li Wei, 2014).

Thus, translinguaging should be positioned as a central pedagogical tool in multilingual classrooms – not as a crutch, but as a cognitive enhancer that enables deeper engagement with texts. When students are encouraged to think, process, and express in their full linguistic repertoire, they engage in higher-order cognitive activities that enrich summary writing, comprehension, and academic literacy.

Future research should focus on implementing translinguaging-informed writing pedagogies that allow multilingual students to leverage their home languages as cognitive tools for processing and expressing complex ideas. Instead of enforcing monolingual writing norms, educational institutions should incorporate translinguaging as an integral component of academic literacy instruction, ensuring that students can engage meaningfully with texts in ways that align with their linguistic realities.

Thus, this study affirms that translinguaging is not merely a strategy for accommodating multilingual learners but a powerful epistemological tool that transforms the nature of academic writing itself.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of translinguaging in summary writing among multilingual students at a university of technology in South Africa, foregrounding the sociocultural dimensions of literacy learning.

The findings reaffirm existing scholarship on translanguaging and literacy (Canagarajah, 2011; Makalela, 2016; 2022; Ngcobo, et al., 2016), demonstrating that multilingual students benefit significantly when they are allowed to mediate knowledge across languages. Students often struggle with identifying main ideas, paraphrasing, and avoiding plagiarism in L2 academic writing due to cognitive and linguistic constraints. Translanguaging, however, provides a cognitive and epistemic bridge, allowing learners to navigate the complexities of summary writing more effectively. By enabling students to process information in their home languages before translating it into English, translanguaging enhances comprehension, promotes deeper engagement, and fosters originality in academic writing.

Despite these advantages, the study also highlighted a persistent structural challenge: the lack of formal academic vocabulary in African languages, which constrains their full integration into higher education. This limitation underscores the continued dominance of English in academic spaces, reflecting the historical underdevelopment of African language orthographies and terminologies (Bamgbose, 2015; Carstens, 2016). However, this should not be viewed as an inherent limitation of translanguaging, but rather as an urgent call for language policy reform, corpus planning, and curriculum development to expand academic registers in African languages.

Based on these findings, we argue that translanguaging should be formally integrated into academic writing pedagogy. Institutions should adopt multilingual approaches that recognise and validate students' linguistic resources, rather than enforcing rigid monolingual writing norms. In particular:


1. Pedagogical practices: Educators should incorporate translanguaging strategically in summary writing instruction, allowing students to think, process, and draft in their home languages before transitioning to English. This can be achieved through bilingual glossaries, cross-linguistic scaffolding, and structured translanguaging activities.
2. Language development and policy: Universities and policy-makers must invest in the expansion of formal academic lexicons in African languages, supporting efforts to develop technical terminology, multilingual writing resources, and academic publications in indigenous languages.
3. Teacher education and training: Future research should explore how teacher education programmes prepare educators to implement translanguaging-based pedagogies. Many educators still adhere to monolingual instructional norms, either due to lack of awareness or institutional constraints. Teacher training programmes should therefore equip future educators with translanguaging strategies that affirm students' linguistic and cognitive resources.


The presence of multilingual students in higher education is an undeniable reality, yet translanguaging remains marginalised as an instructional practice. While some institutions acknowledge the linguistic diversity of their students, few have taken systematic steps to integrate multilingual pedagogies into their curricula. The scepticism surrounding

translanguaging in academia must be actively challenged through policy implementation, curriculum adaptation, and educator training.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that translanguaging is not merely an alternative approach, but a necessary paradigm shift that aligns with inclusive and equitable education. By embracing translanguaging as a legitimate academic practice, universities can foster deeper learning, epistemic access, and linguistic justice – ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, can fully participate in academic discourse and knowledge production.

Author Biographies

Akulina Chihobo holds a PhD in Applied Language and Literacy Education from the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research focuses on translanguaging, multilingual education and literacies. She is passionate about language-inclusive pedagogies and supporting diverse student populations through academic skills development in higher education. 

Leketi Makalela is a full Professor and founding Director of the Hub for Multilingual Education and Literacies at the University of the Witwatersrand. He obtained his PhD from Michigan State University with combined specializations in linguistics, literacy and education. His research areas include translanguaging, multilingual education and literacies. 

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the institution, and participants were well informed of the requirements of the study.

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