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Communicating in multilingual learning ecologies: Teacher trainees' perceptions of translanguaging in lecture rooms in Kenya

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Abstract
This research delves into the nuanced perceptions of teacher trainees (TTs) regarding translanguaging (TL) whilst communicating within the lecture room learning ecology. It focuses on four fundamental learning processes, namely, attention retention, success in learning, interaction with the instructor, and knowledge transmission. Anchored in classic theoretical approaches to communicative competence and the more recent theory of translingualism, the research addresses the overarching question: How do teacher trainees perceive and experience the utilisation of translanguaging practices in a multilingual university learning ecology in Kenya? Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 80 TTs at a Kenyan university to address this inquiry. The results reveal predominantly positive responses for TL in the lecture room ecology regarding solidarity and status relationships. For instance, participants expressed a heightened ability to retain attention when instructors judiciously employed a mix of languages, resulting in increased engagement and a more favourable learning experience. Additionally, while TTs express confidence in using TL for certain tasks, there is a notable hesitation in written assignments and examinations. These and other outcomes contribute valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between TTs' reflexivity and their responses to TL. This study underscores the significance of incorporating TTs' perspectives into the ongoing language political debate surrounding Kenya's language-in-education policy, particularly in exploring new possibilities and approaches to translingual pedagogy. Translingual pedagogy foregrounds the collaborative use of languages and linguistic abilities that individuals draw on to make meaning and communicate effectually – their complete linguistic repertoire.

Introduction

In multilingual environments such as Kenya, translanguaging manifests as an inevitable phenomenon that permeates various facets of communication within informal social discourse and formal learning ecologies, the former being a context conducive to incidental language learning. Recently Translanguaging has been defined by Lubliner and Grisham (2017) as the purposeful incorporation

of students' linguistic and cultural resources as a medium of instruction. Translanguaging also comprises, among others, language practices like translation, localised discourse markers, codemeshing, codemixing, and codeswitching, whilst transcending them, nonetheless. Translanguaging (henceforth TL) is a social and educational practice that contributes to linguistic creativity (Tsokalidou, 2016). Dodounou and Otundo (2021), for instance, offered insights into the dilemma faced by African writers who opt to express themselves in ex-colonial European languages, potentially compromising both their creative realms and the imaginative experiences of African readers. Closer home, in the educational context of Kenya, particularly within the formal learning ecology of university lecture rooms, the ex-colonial language – English, serves as the prescribed medium of discourse. In this learning ecology TL has emerged as a natural phenomenon of multilingual speakers' language conduct because of the 68 local languages spoken in Kenya. Thus, in these lecture rooms, both oral and written communication in a combination involving standard and non-standard (Kenyan) English, standard and non-standard (Kenyan) Kiswahili, Sheng (a mixed urban youth variety), and occasionally local languages is inexorable. In these multilingual learning ecologies, perceptions regarding TL in oral and written communication are formed. In this study, 'perceptions' are what is conveyed to others as what we perceive, including our views. As such, perceptions are relevant for linguistic analysis in multilingual learning ecologies like lecture rooms because they provide insights into theory vis-à-vis practice in formal learning spaces.

Studies regarding perceptions, views, and attitudes toward TL in higher education learning spaces have recently gained prominence. Rivera and Mazak (2017) conducted a case study within university lecture rooms in Puerto Rico, revealing that participants exhibited indifference towards TL pedagogy. This indifference suggested that TL instruction was not regularly implemented in their formal learning spaces. In a North American context, Pujol-Ferran and colleagues (2016) observed high levels of student satisfaction with plurilingualism in content courses at the college level. Conversely, Marshall, Hayashi, and Yeung (2012) documented that international students in a Canadian university extensively employed the TL, particularly in activities such as note-taking and communication with peers but demonstrated a preference for using standard English in assessed work. Kim and Petraki (2009) identified a consensus between teachers and students in a Vietnamese setting regarding the supportive role of the first language (L1) in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, especially during the initial stages of learning. In Japan, McMillan and Rivers (2011) analysed the attitudes of native English speakers toward the TL at a university and observed that teachers held positive views regarding the selective use of L1 in English classes, in contrast to the institutional policy.

On the African continent, Carstens (2016) evaluated the influence of TL on the development of academic literacy in English among African bilinguals. The study revealed that participants not only acknowledged the advantages of this pedagogy but also emphasised its cognitive benefits. The practice of TL facilitated participants in scaffolding their comprehension of concepts by constructing a comprehensive overview, simplifying complex ideas, and distributing information (Carstens, 2016). In South Africa, the attitudes of both students and lecturers constitute a significant factor influencing the adoption of TL practices within lecture rooms (Ngcobo, 2014; Mashiyi, 2014; Parmegiani & Rudwick, 2014). Ngcobo (2014), for example, observed that students express a preference for using isiZulu-English in the lecture room, mirroring their linguistic choices off-campus. However, they tend to avoid using pure isiZulu due to concerns about its marketability for career prospects and apprehensions about missing opportunities for English language development. Ngcobo (2014), thus, suggested that lecturers' decisions regarding codeswitching in the lecture room should be informed by reflective accounts from students, and the current study embarks on contributing toward this. Mbirimi-Hungwe (2021) further discovered that university students in South Africa exhibit a positive attitude towards TL, attributing it to enhancing their comprehension of intricate academic concepts

during discussions. Additionally, Hurst and Mona (2017) noted that students generally expressed favourable views regarding the use of TL in a humanities course in South Africa.

The background information and reviewed literature in this section support the notion that in multilingual learning spaces, people use the linguistic resources they possess of two or more languages to make meaning (Canagarajah, 2011). This study, thus, responds to the overarching language political question: How do teacher trainees perceive and experience the utilisation of TL practices in a lecture room ecology in Kenya regarding four fundamental learning processes - attention retention, success in learning, interaction with the instructor, and knowledge transmission? The section on methodology expounds on why teacher trainees (TTs) were targeted for this study. The ensuing section gives an overview of TL in learning ecologies and the theoretical underpinnings utilised herewith.

Translingualism, Communicative Competence, Learning Ecologies

The notion of translanguaging is premised on the Theory of Translingualism. Translingualism "emphasises the need to view traditional language boundaries as dynamic and fluid, rather than static and impermeable" (Lee, 2018: 3), and invites the "pursuit of new knowledge, new ways of knowing and more peaceful relations" (Horner et al., 2011: 307). Particularly, the term translingualism has gained prominence for alternative conceptual paradigms, including translanguaging, and translingual dispositions, among others (Horner et al., 2011; Baker, 2011; García & Li Wei, 2014). Significantly, achieving a thorough understanding of the notion of TL is intricate and dynamic, with the definition having been subject to insightful critique (Block, 2014), and subsequently met with corresponding reactions (Canagarajah, 2017). However, these discussions surpass the scope of the present work.

Lee (2018: 3) indicates that the common denominator for these constructs "is the explicit concern with the fluidity and negotiability of language boundaries, premised on the possibility that language is never normative but instead always negotiable". Canagarajah (2011) comments that TL is an integrated system for multilingual speakers to be negotiated. Thus, the proficiency of multilingual speakers needs to be based on the construction of this repertoire rather than developing a total mastery of each language (Canagarajah, 2011), especially when evaluating their literacy. This notion supports Communicative Competence (Hymes, 1972) that foregrounds competency rather than fluency. In multilingual learning ecologies, like the lecture rooms in Kenya, rather than performative competence in the prescribed ex-colonial language (English), the use of other available languages could be seen as an effective medium of communication for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. This sentiment supports scholarly investigations that insist on the legitimacy of 'different' language practices as part of the many imaginations of the future of Englishes (Lee, 2018), especially in multilingual learning ecologies.

A learning ecology has been defined as "the space in which learning occurs" (Seimens, 2007: 63). Hence, an individual's learning ecology comprises their process and set of contexts and interactions that provide them with opportunities and resources for learning, development, and achievement (Seimens, 2007). This research pays attention to four fundamental learning processes within the lecture room: attention retention, success in learning, interaction with the instructor, and knowledge transmission (see Figure 1.).

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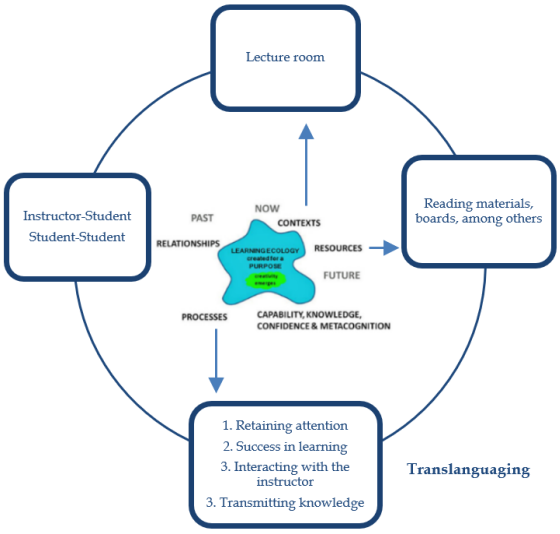

Figure 1: Lecture room ecology designed by the author, adapting Jackson's learning ecology (Creative Academic, 2023)

Referring to the lecture room ecology in Figure 1, and positioning it in the vastly multilingual Kenya, it is well-observed that speakers (instructors and students) can shift flexibly from one language to another as well as employ their full linguistic repertoires. This paves the way for the utilisation of various methods in lecture rooms, including translanguaging, which was first introduced by Williams (1994) as a pedagogical practice of alternating between languages. Translanguaging has been applied in pedagogy, for instance, where a student reads in one language and writes in a different one (Williams, 1994). In this study, the interest lies in the perceptions, including views of teacher trainees (who are at the same time students) regarding such happenings within the lecture room. The succeeding section illuminates the methodology used to capture the perceptions.

Materials and Method

During this investigation, a structured questionnaire was administered to a cohort of 80 teacher trainees (TTs) during their culminating year at a public university in Kenya. Only those who volunteered for the exercise participated. The selection of TTs as the focal group for examining perceptions regarding TL was deliberate, stemming from their dual roles as both language instructor trainees and students in the selected learning ecology. Notably, TTs in Kenya, upon reaching their final year of university, have completed a minimum of three months of teaching practice at secondary schools as part of their teacher training. This dual function as prospective instructors and ongoing learners underscores the considerable importance of TTs' perceptions regarding TL that will in turn influence their prospective instructional methodologies within the realm of lower-level teaching. A questionnaire on perceptions, including views and attitudes of participants, is by nature a self-reflexive endeavour and has been described by Canagarajah (2007) as a great tool that facilitates the description of characteristics of a large population. In the questionnaire, the focus was on four major lecture room happenings: Student attentiveness, success in learning (input), perceptions about lecturers' TL, and the transfer of knowledge (output). Details of these activities are revealed in the findings and discussion. The questionnaire incorporated Likert-type items measured on a 5-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The responses were then quantitatively evaluated

using descriptive statistics, and the data was fed into Excel for the visualization of results in graphical forms.

Results

The demographic profile showed that a predominant cohort of participants in this investigation fell within the age bracket of 23 to 25 years. Notably, all these TTs were pursuing a Bachelor's degree related to teaching: Bachelor of Arts with Education (75%), Bachelor of Education - Special Needs (17%), Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics (5%), and Bachelor of Education – Guidance and Counselling (3%). Linguistically, the prevailing first languages among the majority comprised Kalenjin (20%), Luhya (20%), and Luo (16.30%). This could be related to the reality that Kalenjin, Luhya, and Luo are the predominant languages in the western region of Kenya, where the sampled university is physically located. Furthermore, a higher proportion of female TTs (71%) participated in this exercise. Though pertinent, details of these and other variables are not core to this research. Henceforward are the study findings on the perceptions of university TTs on TL in four fundamental learning processes - attention retention, success in learning, interaction with the instructor, and knowledge transmission.

Perceptions of TL in the Lecture Room Ecology

This section presents the perceptions, including views of TTs regarding TL while communicating in the lecture room anchored on the aforementioned four fundamental learning processes. The results of the Likert-type items are displayed on graphs and a 5-point scale: 'strongly agree' - sa, 'agree' - a, 'neutral' - n, 'disagree' – d to 'strongly disagree'– sd. The responses for TTs' views on instructor TL for retaining students' attention are displayed in Figure 2. A notable percentage (37.5% + 30%) agreed or strongly agreed that they can easily concentrate when the instructor captures their attention in class by TL. A significant majority (50% + 25%) agreed or strongly agreed that TL makes them more engaged and helps in understanding what is going on in the class. A considerable portion (35% + 21.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that TL makes them feel closer to the course instructor. A significant number of participants (33.8% + 21.3%) expressed agreement or strong agreement that they are more confident to score an A in a class that uses more than one language. A majority (53.8%) strongly disagreed with the notion that instructors are less proficient in English when TL. Participants generally indicated that TL contributes to making the class less boring, with a combined percentage of 31.3% + 33.8% expressing agreement or strong agreement. The majority of participants (37.5% + 33.8%) expressed agreement or strong agreement that they feel more comfortable learning when the instructor translanguages. The responses varied, with a substantial portion in the neutral category. However, a considerable number (31.3% + 18.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that blending English with Kiswahili is acceptable. Participants displayed a varied response pattern, with a notable percentage in the neutral category.

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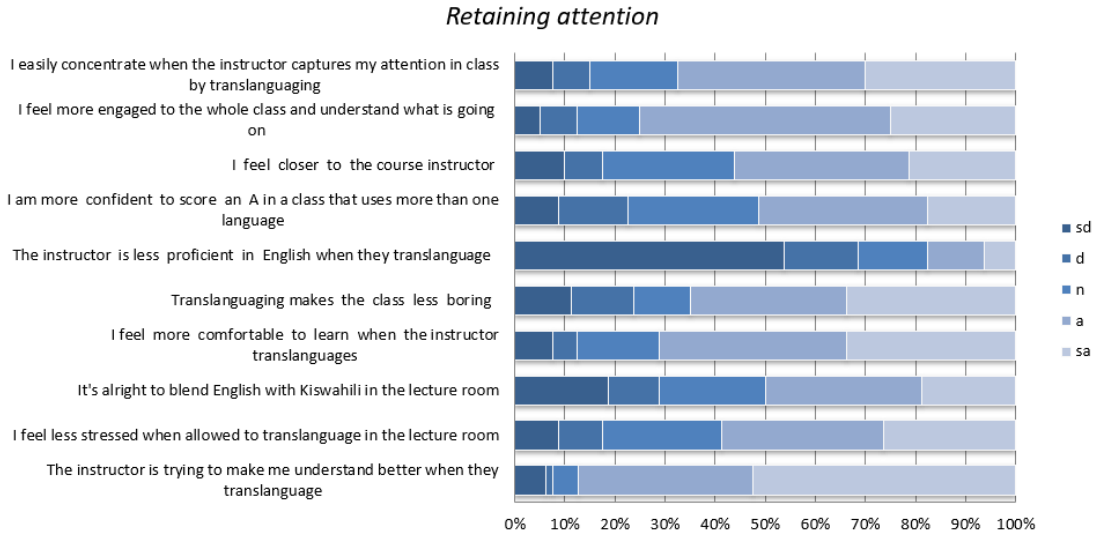

Figure 2: Teacher trainees' views on instructor TL for retaining students' attention

However, a significant proportion (32.50% + 26.30%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel less stressed when allowed to translanguage. A significant majority of participants (52.50% + 35%) strongly agreed or agreed that instructors try to make them understand better whilst TL, suggesting a positive perception of the teaching approach. Figure 3 shows responses about TTs' perceptions of instructors' use of TL in the lecture room. Most participants (41.3% + 26.3%) expressed agreement or strong agreement that TL increases their interest in the lesson.

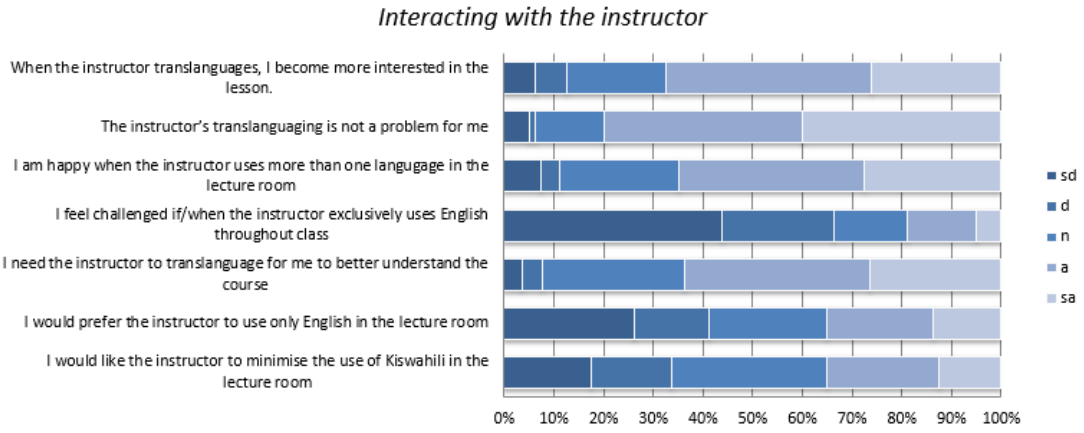

Figure 3: Teacher trainees' perceptions of instructor TL in the lecture room

A substantial majority (40% + 40%) agreed or strongly agreed that TL is not a problem for them, indicating a positive perception of this teaching approach. The majority of participants (37.5% + 27.5%) expressed happiness toward instructors using multiple languages in the lecture room, with a notable portion remaining neutral. A significant majority strongly disagreed or disagreed with feeling challenged when the instructor exclusively used English, indicating a preference for a more inclusive language approach. Many participants (37.5% + 26.3%) expressed a positive stance, indicating a preference for instructors to translanguage for better understanding. However, a substantial percentage remained neutral on this aspect. Responses regarding the preference for instructors to use

only English in the lecture room were evenly distributed across categories, with a relatively higher percentage in the neutral category. Participants exhibited a diverse range of opinions regarding the preference for minimising Kiswahili in the lecture room. The neutral category had the highest percentage, indicating a significant portion of participants were neither for nor against minimising Kiswahili. Concerning TL for success in learning, the results are shown in Figure 4. The responses indicated a varied pattern for successfully carrying out tasks/activities through TL. The neutral category was at 20%, and participants expressing agreement or strong agreement accounted for a larger proportion.

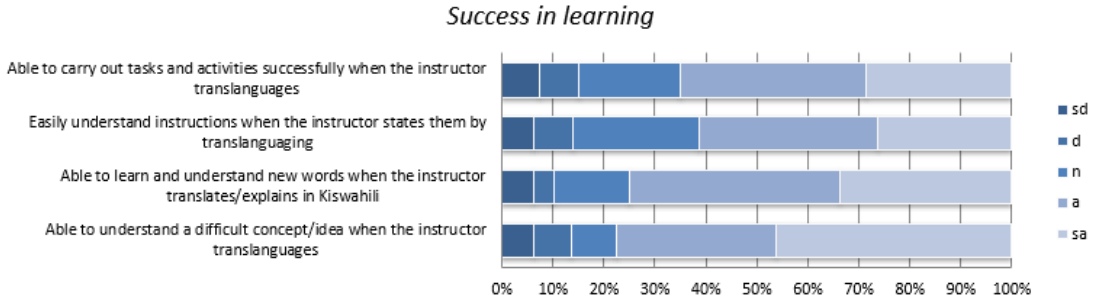

Figure 4: Teacher trainees' perceptions of TL for success in learning

Participants demonstrated a diverse range of responses regarding their ability to understand instructions through TL. The neutral category had the highest percentage (25%), and a relatively balanced distribution was observed across the agree and strongly agree categories. A substantial majority of participants (41.3% + 33.8%) expressed agreement or strong agreement that they can learn new words in Kiswahili when the instructor translates/explains. The neutral category indicates some variability in responses. Many participants (46.3%) strongly agreed that they can understand difficult concepts/ideas when the instructor translanguages. Only a small percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed. Figure 5 shows the results of TTs' views on the use of TL to enable the successful transmission of knowledge. Participants exhibited a more diverse range of responses for explaining concepts or ideas in written assignments/examinations. The highest percentage fell into the strongly disagree category (28.7%), followed by agree and strongly agree combined (22.5% + 21.3%). The neutral category was at 13.8%, and a smaller percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed.

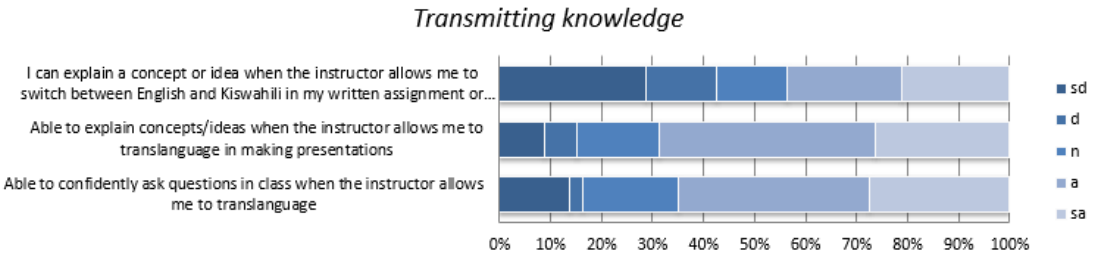

Figure 5: Teacher trainees' views on their own TL for success in knowledge transfer

A substantial majority of participants (42.5% + 26.3%) reported being confident in explaining concepts or ideas when allowed to translanguage in oral presentations. The neutral category accounted for 16.3%, and a smaller percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed. The majority of participants (37.5% + 27.5%) expressed agreement or strong agreement with being confident in asking questions in class when allowed to translanguage. Neutral responses accounted for 18.8%, and a smaller percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Discussion

The findings indicate that participants generally value TL in terms of both status and solidarity links. The linguistic proficiency of the instructors is not viewed as diminished, and TTs appreciate the effort to improve understanding through TL. The employment of various languages assists in creating a helpful, engaging, and inclusive learning environment, creating student-instructor solidarity. Acceptance of TL, as well as its favourable impact on comfort and confidence, shows an awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity, which promotes solidarity ties in formal learning ecologies. These relationships are mediated in the (non-)use of TL in the lecture room by both TTs and their instructors. Examples of status anchors include items on intelligence, confidence, and competence, among others, while solidarity anchors are items on, for instance, closeness to the instructor (56.30%), engagement to the whole class (75%), and happiness (65%) when TL. Regarding attention retention in the lecture room by use of TL, the results suggest generally positive perceptions of TL in the lecture room, with participants expressing benefits such as enhanced understanding (75%), reduced stress (58.80%), and increased comfort in learning (71.30%). Such findings mirror several studies that support the benefits of classroom TL as a means of promoting a deeper and fuller understanding of content for multilingual speakers (Baker, 2011; Carstens, 2016; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2021). The neutral category indicates some variability in responses, highlighting the diverse experiences and preferences among participants. The positive perceptions in this study align with the idea that TL contributes to linguistic creativity (Tsokalidou, 2016), and reflects the purposeful incorporation of students' linguistic resources (Lubliner & Grisham, 2017).

When it comes to the use of TL by the instructor. The results highlight a range of preferences among participants. There is a notable openness to TL in the lecture room, with a preference for approaches that enhance understanding and engagement. The neutral category is significant in several aspects, suggesting a diversity of opinions and experiences among participants. A significant percentage of TTs (45%) strongly disagreed that they feel challenged when the instructor exclusively uses English throughout the class. Moreover, there was general agreement that instructors' TL was not problematic for the TTs. Teacher trainees reported that instructor TL made them more interested in the course and most of them (strongly) agreed that they needed the instructor to TL for better comprehension of the content. Importantly, there was an almost even distribution of agreement and disagreement for preference for the exclusive usage of English in class and minimising the use of Kiswahili. TL does not in any way render the instructors less proficient in English, but rather that the instructor is trying to facilitate the students' understanding. The results further reveal that TTs concentrate easily when the instructor catches and retains their attention in the lecture room by TL. The preference for TL approaches that enhance understanding and engagement resonates with the definition of TL as incorporating linguistic resources for instruction (Lubliner & Grisham, 2017). Further, the participants' reported happiness and lack of challenge when instructors use TL align with studies emphasising positive attitudes towards TL, particularly in enhancing comprehension (Hurst & Mona, 2017; Ngcobo, 2014). Additionally, positive experiences with instructor TL in understanding difficult concepts and learning new words align with the cognitive benefits of TL reported by Carstens (2016). The results suggest that participants generally have positive experiences with instructor TL across specified academic contexts. A notable proportion strongly agrees that TL aids in understanding difficult concepts/ideas and learning new words in Kiswahili. However, there is more variability in responses when it comes to understanding instructions and successfully carrying out tasks and activities, with a higher percentage in the neutral category for these aspects. The participants' confidence in using TL for certain tasks resonates with studies acknowledging the advantages of TL in specific academic contexts (Carstens, 2016).

As concerns perceptions of TL in the measure and transfer of successfully gained knowledge, in the selected university, like other universities in Kenya, knowledge is measured mainly through written examinations. This entails an end-of-semester standardised examination that makes up 70% and two continuous assessment tests offered within the semester that contribute 30% of the total. Depending on the nature of the course and the instructor, the continuous assessment tests can be in the form of a sit-in examination, a takeaway assignment, or an oral classroom presentation. The results suggest that TTs generally feel more confident in using TL for certain tasks, such as asking questions in class and explaining concepts in presentations, compared to written assignments and examinations where a significant portion expressed lower confidence. The neutral category indicates a notable level of uncertainty or ambivalence in each context. These findings are in line with Mbirimi-Hungwe (2021) who found that university students tend to have a positive attitude toward TL for increasing their understanding of complex academic concepts during discussion. It was intriguing to find that TTs did not reveal the highest affinity for TL in their end-of-semester examinations, even though these contribute to 70% of the total marks. But why do end-of-semester examinations contribute more as a measure of gained knowledge, yet these standardised examinations do not predict the success of learning? What happens throughout the semester should be given equal importance in evaluating and measuring gained knowledge. Intriguingly though, TTs would rather use English exclusively than TL during the end-of-semester main examination. This finding is, like Marshall, Hayashi, and Yeung's (2012) report, that international students in a Canadian university make extensive use of TL, for example when note taking or communicating with class peers but prefer to use standard English when producing assessed work. Perhaps the favourable perceptions of TL could be one solution for recognising the African reader-writer dilemma presented in multilingual literacy (Dodounou & Otundo, 2021). The findings of this study can guide language-in-education policymakers in making informed decisions on suitable curricula that can thrive in multilingual learning ecologies. Lee, for instance, notes that the attempt to curricularise TL is "a political act in the sense that it seeks the representation of translingual practice, driven by the assumption that the invitation and curricularization of these language practices will contribute to their legitimization" (Lee, 2018: 129). He states that the mere inclusion of TL in the classroom, because it is a common practice, cannot be the end to its legitimisation (Lee, 2018: 129).

Conclusion

The findings of this study are relevant for future implementations of language political decisions for Kenya's language-in-education policy. Understanding the findings through the lens of TTs' reflexivity during the questionnaire exercise provides insights into how their own self-awareness and reflective practices contribute to their preferences, challenges, and overall experiences in a multilingual language learning ecology. It adds a layer of complexity to the interpretation of the findings, considering the dynamic interplay between TTs' reflexivity and their responses to TL whilst communicating. Given the perceptions and views discussed in this article, it is no wonder that TL is an inexorable happening in the lecture room ecology. These findings contribute to the ongoing, and much-needed, conversations on decolonising the medium of instruction in Kenya as well as the broader decolonising-through-language agenda on the African continent. As such, views, and perceptions on TL practices in the lecture room ought to be incorporated as core components in decision-making processes regarding, for example, curricula that fit the community, textbook analysis, and analysis and examination of lecture room activities, among others. The current research reveals how solidarity and status relationships through lecture room TL promote holistic learning in four fundamental learning processes. Although language studies have prompted various attempts at

curricularising TL as pedagogic strategies in formal learning spaces, what goes on inside the multilingual lecture room is a vicious cycle and the students' attention, success in learning, engagement with the instructor, and transfer of the gained knowledge are interrelated, pertinent, and significantly influenced by students' perceptions and views toward TL practices. In Kenya, for example, the strategic use of the peripheralised Kiswahili lingua franca in the mainstream lecture room ecology is not enough to legitimise TL, let alone the inclusion of the 68 local languages of Kenya. It is, thus, worth reflecting on the practicability of TL pedagogy. Perhaps a meticulous introduction of Kiswahili, alongside English as an intervention trial, can inform Kenya's language-in-education policy, as both Kiswahili and English are co-official languages. A major challenge for this suggestion, however, would be the means of assessment and evaluation, which may be skewed and reliant on, for instance, the evaluators' attitudes, language training, objectivity, and self-reflexiveness among others which transcend lecture room happenings and may be difficult to control. This study implies that instructors should recognise and respect the diversity of preferences among students regarding TL and adopt flexible language approaches to accommodate various communication styles in learning. Moreover, TL can be leveraged as a tool to enhance student engagement and understanding in the lecture room, whilst fostering cultural and linguistic inclusivity in the learning ecology. To these, this research beckons further exploration to understand how TL can be effectively integrated into various assessment formats, considering the reported uncertainty in written assignments and examinations.

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