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Sesotho Language Acquisition by Faculty of Education Students in
South Africa: A Systematic Review

Sesotho Language Acquisition by Faculty of Education Students in South Africa: A Systematic Review

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Article Info	Abstract
	Higher education institutions are increasingly interested in teaching African languages, specifically as third, fourth, or additional languages. Learning Sesotho poses a unique challenge to non-native speakers if introduced at the exit phase. This systematic review aims to identify the challenges students face while learning Sesotho at the exit stages of their educational degrees and explore how their proficiency in Sesotho can benefit professional teaching practices in different regions of South Africa. Within the scope of this objective, a comprehensive literature search was conducted in "Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR" As of 22 September 2024, a total of 73 articles were identified from the databases. During the initial screening of titles and abstracts, 11 duplicates were excluded. Of the remaining 62 articles, 40 were excluded based on relevance, and 22 were downloaded to the digital workspace. Prioritising African languages in education, particularly by studying additional indigenous languages, can result in significant advantages. Therefore, the study examines the pros and cons of acquiring conversational Sesotho proficiency, particularly in a university setting where IsiZulu may be the predominant language. This exploration highlights the broader implications and benefits of introducing linguistic diversity in educational environments in exit phases. In order to capture nuanced perspectives and experiences, this paper adopts a systematic literature review approach to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the challenges, benefits, and implications of learning Sesotho as an additional language in higher education contexts. The findings of this research highlight that student-teachers lack an understanding of the need to learn an additional language, and therefore, they are not motivated to acquire this knowledge. **Keywords:** Conversational language, challenges, functional language, native language, official languages.

Introduction

Conversational language learning in South Africa facilitates communication among people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As a multilingual country with twelve official languages and numerous unrecognised minority languages, South Africa requires individuals to understand at least two languages. This multilingual proficiency is particularly beneficial for preservice teachers (Puig-Mayenco et al., 2020), as it enhances their ability to communicate with broader communities (Lewis et al., 2012) and improves their employment prospects beyond KwaZulu-Natal, where IsiZulu is predominantly spoken. Teaching

conversational Sesotho to non-native speakers, particularly IsiZulu first-language speakers, presents challenges and opportunities. Sesotho, one of South Africa's official languages and the primary language of Lesotho, has unique linguistic features that can make it difficult for students to encounter it for the first time. This systematic review explores the challenges and opportunities of introducing Sesotho as a conversational language to Faculty of Education students.

The South African Higher Education Language Policy 2002 mandates universities develop language policies to promote learning languages beyond English and Afrikaans for academic and social integration (Cele, 2021). Language policies serve as transitional instruments that guide the shift from traditional language norms to more inclusive multilingual functions (Deutschmann & Zelime, 2022; Kamwangamalu, 2001). To align with these principles, some South African universities have introduced the learning of isiZulu and Sesotho, representing the two major language clusters—Nguni and Sotho. Language is a key vehicle for knowledge acquisition, and its role in education must be reinforced to improve student success (Ramothwala et al., 2022).

South Africa's 26 universities operate within a multilingual framework that fosters linguistic inclusivity. During apartheid, English and Afrikaans were the only official languages in higher education, with universities divided along linguistic lines. However, the post-1994 democratic government recognised eleven official languages, namely Sepedi, Tshivenda, Sesotho, isiZulu, Setswana, Xitsonga, isiXhosa, siSwati, isiNdebele, English, and Afrikaans. While English remains a dominant global language (Alexander, 2003), the first documented linguistic policy in post-apartheid South Africa acknowledges the importance of multilingualism in higher education. However, universities have revised their language policies since 1994.

There is a strong continuity of English dominance, with minimal structural shifts to promote indigenous African languages meaningfully (Maseko & Siziba, 2023), and the inclusion of indigenous African languages in higher education would enhance understanding, identity and inclusivity (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). The Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE) of 2002 requires universities to implement multilingualism in teaching and learning, while the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Arts and Culture, 2002) mandates institutions to address key issues such as languages of instruction, the future of indigenous languages in academia, the study of foreign languages, and the promotion of multilingualism in policy and practice.

This study examines how universities implement these language policies and the extent to which they support the teaching of conversational Sesotho. It also explores non-native Sesotho learners' pedagogical challenges and identifies opportunities for enhancing their language acquisition within the faculty of education curriculum.

Literature Review

The literature primarily focuses on English as a medium of instruction for non-native speakers, often overlooking South Africa's multilingual context and the need to recognise all indigenous languages.

The colonial and apartheid administrations in South Africa prioritised English and Afrikaans, marginalising African (Bantu) languages spoken by the African majority. According to the Language Policy for Higher Education (2002), South African higher education institutions must promote the dominant African languages in their respective provinces. The policy further emphasises that universities must develop African languages as academic study and research fields, elevating them beyond their traditional use in homes and communities. The Bantu Administration Act of 1951, a precursor to the Bantu Homeland Citizens Act of 1970, established Bantu reserves (Bantustans) along ethnic lines as part of apartheid's policy of separate development. These divisions included KwaZulu for the Zulu-speaking people, QwaQwa for the Sesotho-speaking, and KwaNgwane for the Swati-speaking, among others. Although efforts to dismantle these policies are ongoing, their legacy persists. In KwaZulu-Natal, isiZulu remains the dominant language (Census, 2011, 2022). Therefore, universities in KwaZulu-Natal should promote isiZulu as the province's dominant language (Nkosi, 2019; Kamwendo et al., 2014). It is also crucial that students in education faculty learn additional languages from other provinces to prepare for social interaction in a multilingual South Africa, which would benefit post-training job placements. According to Kamwendo et al., (2014), this is a key step toward decolonising knowledge production and fostering African-centred scholarship in South African higher education.

Nkosi (2020) argues that student-teachers should acquire additional languages to communicate effectively in these languages and to enhance their knowledge of African languages, as mandated by the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ). Learning one or two indigenous languages broadens opportunities for social interaction (Nkosi, 2020). Nkosi's (2020) study in KwaZulu-Natal found that student-teachers appreciated learning conversational isiZulu. Many participants felt non-native speakers should become proficient in at least two indigenous languages. However, some students felt that learning isiZulu conversationally was unnecessary, dismissing it as "worthless" (Nkosi, 2020). Introducing isiZulu as a compulsory conversational language was carefully considered, requiring non-native speakers to learn it while native speakers were required to learn another indigenous language. However, introducing Sesotho as a compulsory language presents a challenge, as students from regions like Gauteng, Free State, and Mpumalanga already possess basic proficiency in Sesotho, making it less beneficial. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to introduce a language less familiar to them.

Learning isiZulu, Sesotho, and other indigenous languages as a non-native speaker presents various challenges. These include difficulties with speaking skills, pronunciation, vocabulary, peer ridicule, and inadequate time for practice (Nkosi, 2020). The South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) advocates for African languages to be used as the Language of Teaching and Learning (LOLT) in the Foundation Phase of education in all South African schools (Ramothwala et al., 2022). This raises an important question: How can teachers accommodate multilingualism in a diverse South African classroom? According to the LiEP, this policy applies in the Foundation Phase, after which the School Governing Body (SGB)

and School Management decide on the second language. Ramothwala et al. (2022) note that teachers informally introduce indigenous languages. To promote inclusivity and differentiation, teachers must be proficient in more than one indigenous language recognised by the South African government, especially since translanguaging is impossible if teachers only know one.

Recent studies on multilingual disciplines advocate for increasing focus on plurilingual pedagogy in education (Cross et al., 2022; Kubota, 2016; Marshall & Moore, 2018). Plurilingualism aims to enhance intercultural dialogue and social cohesion, aligning to ensure students at exit levels in higher education can converse in multiple languages. This approach encourages the creation of new meanings and understanding, applying to any language regardless of region. However, some scholars argue that pedagogical practices in higher education remain monolingual, with plurilingual practices often marginalised. Recognising and valuing students' plurilingual competence can significantly improve academic performance and social well-being. While South Africa has made strides in promoting multilingualism, some universities still struggle to implement multilingual education effectively (Madiba, 2013). The current debates emphasise that multilingualism contributes to developing students' conceptual, communicative, and pedagogical skills (Hlatshwayo & Siziba, 2013; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023). Although multilingualism can be perceived as a threat to minority languages, it also offers opportunities for their development and broader use. Increased student engagement with multilingual education improves learning outcomes and skills acquisition (Khoalenyane & Ajani, 2023).

Exposure to multilingualism during teacher training enhances learning experiences that extend into professional practice. Multilingualism benefits not only lecture settings but also post-academic contexts. Coetzee-de Vos (2019) observes that students in higher education engage in translanguaging through code-switching. Regardless of proficiency, pre-service teachers often use multiple languages to construct meaning and new knowledge. Therefore, learning conversational Sesotho is an academic survival tool that benefits both the learning process and future classroom practice, where teachers may need to code-switch to communicate with learners. Cekiso et al., (2019) found that teachers not trained in using African languages struggled to code-switch and translate concepts during classroom interactions.

A study by Cekiso et al. (2019) revealed that teaching materials in the Eastern Cape, while written in the learners' first language, were inadequate due to the mix of languages spoken by students. This highlights the importance of teachers being multilingual to avoid creating linguistic gaps between themselves, students, and the communities they serve. Thus, learning conversational Sesotho in higher education can help teachers bridge these gaps and facilitate more effective learning.

Cele (2021) laments the slow progress in implementing the teaching of African languages in both schools and universities, despite their importance as second or third languages for students, particularly pre-service teachers. He attributes the resistance to fully implementing

South Africa's language policy to the entrenched belief that English is a language of "success, progress, and sophistication," a view perpetuated by education planners. This may explain why some institutions introduce language learning only at later stages, which limits the potential advantages of using these languages in pre-service teacher education.

Functional Theory

Researchers exploring language often confront the question of why languages exhibit specific structures. Chomsky's influential research on language dynamics, conducted in 1965 and 1981, has shaped many investigations into this issue. His work suggests that universal principles govern the structure of human languages worldwide, leading to shared linguistic patterns across diverse languages. However, functionalist approaches provide an alternative perspective on language structure and its functional purposes. According to Kaschak and Gernsbacher (2013), functionalist theories reject the idea that language knowledge confers special cognitive abilities, arguing that language acquisition does not inherently increase intelligence. Functionalists propose that language structures emerge through the interaction of linguistic input, cognitive processing, and social influences during real-time language use. This perspective views language as a dynamic, adaptive system shaped by recurrent patterns and frequent usage, influenced by internal cognitive processes and external social factors (Bischoff & Jany, 2017).

One subset of functionalism, Functional Theory, regards language primarily as a tool for communication. This theory emphasises teaching practical language skills needed for real-world situations, such as asking for directions or discussing personal interests. It aligns with the focus of this study, which explores the benefits of learning Sesotho as an additional language for preservice teachers.

The choice of the Functional Approach for this study is grounded in its emphasis on real-life language functions. In South Africa's multilingual context, shaped by historical legacies such as apartheid's division along ethnic lines, learning a conversational language like Sesotho can promote communication and integration across diverse communities. This approach recognises South Africa's linguistic diversity. It aims to equip educators with practical language skills that enable them to engage effectively with various linguistic groups, irrespective of their geographic origins or job placements after training. Functional Theory posits that language is a tool for communication in real-life contexts. Learners, influenced by their multicultural and diverse environments, often become proficient in languages beyond their mother tongue. This theory highlights the importance of preservice teachers' multilingual skills, as it facilitates communication and code-switching in the classroom (Cekiso et al., 2019). Preservice teachers can enhance their pedagogical function by adopting an additional language like Sesotho and fostering better social interaction with learners. In this context, the study explored the challenges and benefits of learning Sesotho within South African universities, particularly those faced by students in the Faculty of Education. The following research questions were formulated to guide this exploration:

    (i)   What challenges do students face when learning Sesotho in their academic programme in the Faculty of Education in South Africa?

    (ii)   What are the benefits of learning Sesotho as a conversational language in a university setting?

These questions aim to uncover the obstacles and opportunities associated with indigenous language acquisition in higher education, focusing on the Sesotho language.

Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the challenges and prospects of learning an additional native language at institutions of higher learning in South Africa. A systematic approach was adopted to identify, evaluate, and synthesise relevant literature (Pati & Lorusso, 2018) on the teaching and learning of Sesotho as a native language for non-native speakers. This method allows for a comprehensive and transparent analysis of existing research (Garritty et al., 2021; Pati & Lorusso, 2018), including high-quality and credible studies.

Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR, to identify peer-reviewed journal articles, research studies, and other relevant sources. The search terms were carefully selected to align with the study's objective. The following keywords were used:

- *"Language acquisition and its use"*

- *"Native language"*

- *"Sesotho education"*

- *"African languages in higher education"*

- *"Challenges learning Sesotho"*

- *"Language proficiency teaching practice"*

- *"Indigenous languages South Africa"*

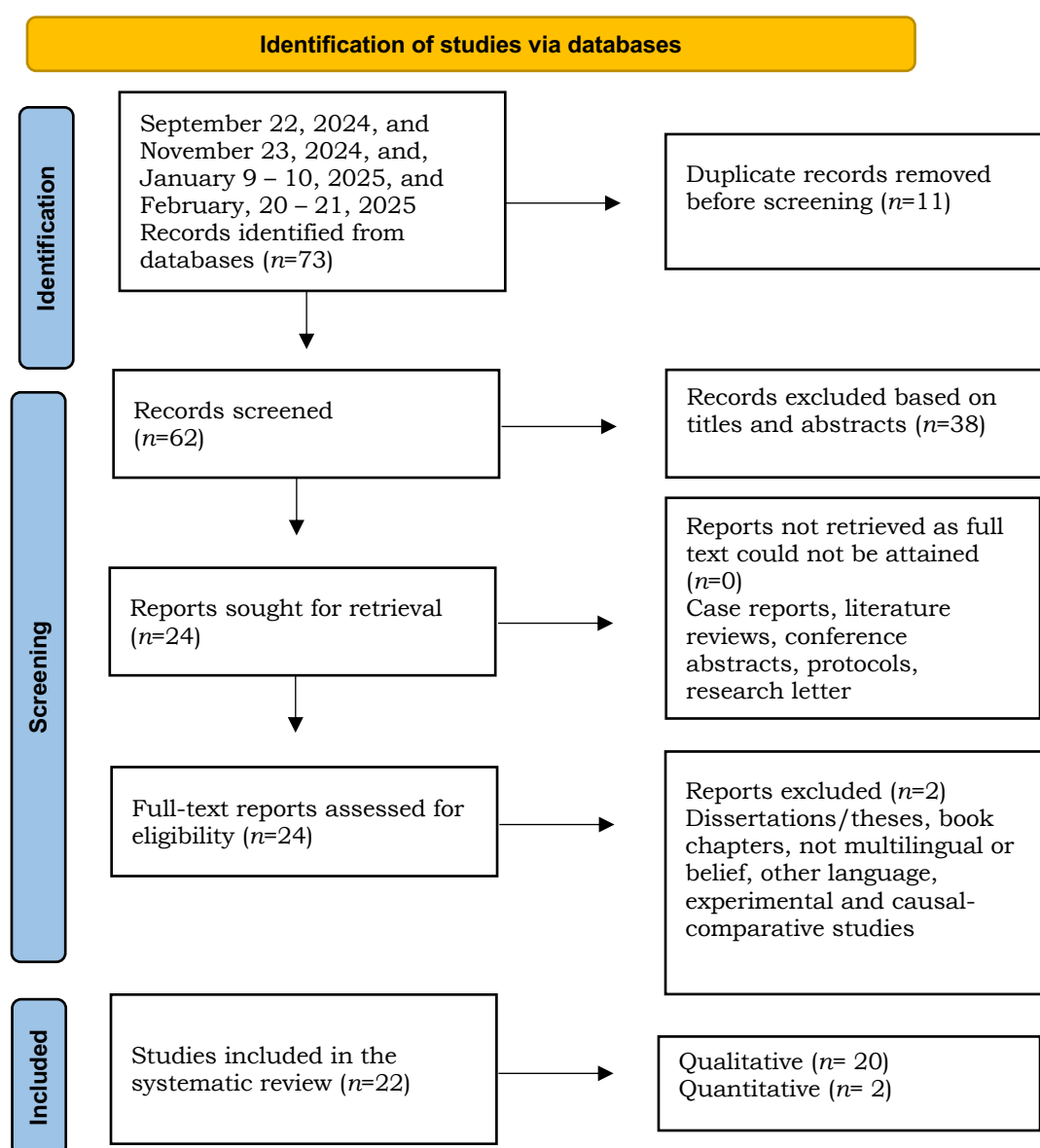- *"Language acquisition exit phase"*

Only English-language publications were included to maintain accessibility and analytical consistency. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search results effectively. For example, in Scopus, the search string 'Sesotho education' AND 'higher education' AND 'non-native' was used to retrieve relevant studies.

Data Screening

The selection process adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews) guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The data screening process involved a rigorous three-stage approach to ensure the inclusion of only the most relevant and high-quality sources. Initially, 62 articles were retrieved from various databases and subjected to title and abstract screening to determine their alignment with the study's

objectives. Articles that met the preliminary criteria proceeded to the full-text review, where they were further assessed based on the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria. To enhance the reliability of the selection process, three authors collaboratively reviewed the screened articles and reached a consensus on the most suitable studies. The timeframe of 2019–2024 was selected to focus on recent developments in Sesotho education. A total of 22 articles from this period were included in the study (Appendix. A). The PRISMA flowchart (Page et al., 2021) detailing the search process and the inclusion and exclusion of articles is presented in Figure 1 below.

Identification of studies via databases

Identification

September 22, 2024, and November 23, 2024, and, January 9 – 10, 2025, and February, 20 – 21, 2025 Records identified from databases (n=73) → Duplicate records removed before screening (n=11)

Screening

Records screened (n=62) → Records excluded based on titles and abstracts (n=38)

Reports sought for retrieval (n=24) → Reports not retrieved as full text could not be attained (n=0) Case reports, literature reviews, conference abstracts, protocols, research letter

Full-text reports assessed for eligibility (n=24) → Reports excluded (n=2) Dissertations/theses, book chapters, not multilingual or belief, other language, experimental and causal-comparative studies

Included

Studies included in the systematic review (n=22) → Qualitative (n= 20) Quantitative (n= 2)

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the selected studies' relevance and quality. The table (*Table 1*) below indicates the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in data collection for this study.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
IC1: The paper should be focused on teaching Sesotho as an additional language at an institution of higher learning.	EC1: The paper is written in a language other than English.
IC2: The paper was published only in English.	EC2: The paper discusses English language as an additional language.
IC3: The paper was published in reputable journals.	EC3: Papers on teaching in mother tongue language and teaching a second language in higher learning.
IC 4: Studies published between 2019 and 2024	EC4: Studies published outside the prescribed period (2019 to 2024).
	EC 5: Teaching content through a second language

Data Extraction and Analysis

The selected studies were analysed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying recurring themes and patterns in the literature. Key themes included teaching methodologies, learning challenges, institutional support, and language policy implications in higher education institutions. Data extraction involved recording study characteristics such as author, publication year, methodology, and key findings related to Sesotho learning.

Limitations

Discussing limitations is a crucial aspect of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) process, as it helps to mitigate potential bias. All limitations should be identified, including risks at different review process stages. Every review inherently carries some bias risk, and this section should not be overlooked or viewed as a weakness in the overall report (Pati & Lorusso, 2018). A transparent acknowledgement of these limitations strengthens the review's credibility and provides context for interpreting the findings. While this systematic literature review offers valuable insights, it has limitations (Pati & Larusso, 2018). The study exclusively considered English-language publications, which may have led to the exclusion of relevant research published in other languages. Although comprehensive databases were utilised, some pertinent studies from local or non-indexed journals may not have been captured, potentially limiting the breadth of the review. Additionally, the research focused on literature published within a specific timeframe, which may have omitted older yet significant studies that could provide a deeper historical context. Furthermore, this study relies solely on secondary sources, without incorporating primary data collection methods such as interviews or surveys with students and lecturers, which could have enriched the findings with firsthand

perspectives. Lastly, while thematic analysis is an effective method for identifying key patterns, the interpretation of themes remains susceptible to researchers' bias, which may influence the overall conclusions.

Findings

The research questions were: (i) What challenges do students face when learning Sesotho in their academic programme in the Faculty of Education in South Africa? and (ii) What are the benefits of learning Sesotho as a conversational language in a university setting? Within the scope of these questions, the articles included in the systematic review were analysed, and the results are as follows.

Challenges of Sesotho acquisition

The articles included in the study discussed the challenges faced in learning Sesotho

and other conversational languages in higher education spaces. Although various benefits are associated with learning indigenous languages, including Sesotho, pre-service teachers often face numerous challenges in acquiring this language. One primary obstacle is the lack of intrinsic motivation. Many students approach the Sesotho module expecting external rewards, such as improved employability, rather than a genuine desire to acquire the language. As a result, learning is often superficial and driven by assessment outcomes rather than communicative competence. Without a strong internal drive, learners are less likely to engage meaningfully with or practice the language beyond the classroom context.

In addition, many students who attempt to learn Sesotho come from English-medium educational backgrounds, where indigenous languages are marginalised or absent. This prior exposure affects both their attitude and confidence. Students often feel anxious and insecure when speaking or writing Sesotho, particularly when native speakers evaluate them. This anxiety, sometimes debilitating, undermines their willingness to participate actively in class discussions or attempt conversations in Sesotho.

Another significant challenge is the limited availability of appropriate learning resources tailored to the needs of higher education students (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014). Much of the existing material is either outdated or not engaging, leading to disinterest and a perception that Sesotho is difficult or irrelevant. As Eguz (2019) suggests, learning materials should be age-appropriate and intellectually stimulating, especially for older students learning a third or fourth language.

Lecturer attitudes and teaching strategies also impact the success of Sesotho language acquisition. When instruction lacks interactivity or focuses too heavily on rote memorisation, students struggle to connect the language to real-life use. Mphasha et al., (2022) argue that questions posed in class should stimulate critical thinking and encourage the practical use of Sesotho in both academic and social contexts. However, when teaching methods fail to do this, the language remains abstract and challenging to grasp.

Sociolinguistic dynamics further complicate the learning of Sesotho. Speakers of dominant languages often lack urgency or interest in learning another indigenous language, particularly if their own is widely spoken or regionally dominant. This leads to negative attitudes towards Sesotho, with some students questioning its utility. Such perceptions are shaped by broader societal attitudes that continue to privilege English and, to some extent, Afrikaans over indigenous African languages.

Furthermore, phonological differences between Sesotho and a learner's home language or English can be daunting. Features such as vowel articulation, consonant clusters, and tonal variations require students to make significant phonetic and grammatical adjustments. Foulkes and Docherty (2006) and Labov (2011) note that such differences are deeply embedded in one's linguistic identity and speech habits, often resistant to change in adulthood.

In summary, challenges in learning Sesotho range from motivational and attitudinal barriers to structural issues such as poor teaching methods, anxiety, insufficient materials, and complex phonological features. If these challenges are not adequately addressed, they may continue to limit the effectiveness of efforts to promote Sesotho and other African languages in South African higher education.

Benefits for additional conversational language

The studies included in the systematic review (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022; Kaya & Seleti, 2014) have addressed the various benefits of learning a conversational language such as Sesotho and others, particularly in the context of decolonising higher education and fostering multilingualism. One key benefit highlighted is the role of Sesotho in promoting cultural understanding and inclusion. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture and knowledge. In South Africa, where linguistic diversity is a hallmark of society, learning Sesotho enables individuals, particularly pre-service teachers, to immerse themselves in the local cultures and communities they serve. By embracing Sesotho and other indigenous languages, educators can engage more effectively with learners and parents, ensuring that all students feel valued and understood, which fosters a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Furthermore, the included studies emphasise the cognitive and pedagogical benefits of learning Sesotho. Teachers and students can use their home languages in educational settings, which enhances comprehension and academic performance. This is particularly evident in basic education, where students learn best in their mother tongue, leading to improved engagement and a deeper understanding of the curriculum (Crawford, 2004). In higher education, fostering linguistic diversity by integrating languages like Sesotho and English promotes inclusivity, empowering students to express themselves fully and participate more actively in academic discussions. This approach challenges the colonial legacy of language exclusion and supports epistemic justice by valuing indigenous knowledge systems, as Kaya and Seleti (2014) noted.

The studies also address the professional advantages of multilingualism, particularly in rural and traditionally diverse regions (see Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023). Teachers who are proficient in Sesotho can use strategies such as translanguaging, translation, and codeswitching to facilitate communication and knowledge exchange (Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). These pedagogical tools help bridge linguistic gaps, enabling teachers to engage with students from different language backgrounds more effectively. Communicating in Sesotho improves classroom dynamics and enhances relationships with parents and community members, whether face-to-face or digital (Murendeni & Fulufhelo, 2023). This is crucial as the rise of social media and digital learning environments necessitates multilingual competence to ensure effective communication in the modern educational landscape (Khoalenyane, 2023; Nahidh et al., 2023; Ratten, 2023; Riady et al., 2022; Sobaih et al. 2022).

Lastly, the studies included in the systematic review highlight that learning Sesotho brings multiple benefits, including cultural enrichment, cognitive development, and enhanced professional opportunities. These advantages reinforce the importance of integrating indigenous languages into teacher training and educational practices to create more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environments across South Africa.

Discussion

Instruction in the mother tongue improves learning and the learners' participation in class. It is concerning to note that despite proven knowledge about the importance of the mother tongue in effective and successful teaching and learning, institutions of higher learning continue to offer English as the primary medium of instruction, thereby relegating modules such as conversational Sesotho to a one-year or exit program. Exposing pre-service teachers to more than a year of instruction in African languages will help them to be firmly grounded in the language so that they can use it beyond being a translating and code-switching tool.

Indigenous languages in South Africa are not considered languages of power. Some of them, like isiZulu, may be widely spoken locally, yet they are not usable internationally. While 23% of the population speaks languages like isiZulu, only 16% of South Africans speak Sesotho. Therefore, this generates negative attitudes against acquiring conversational Sesotho and isiZulu, especially among home language speakers of English and Afrikaans.

Some pre-service teachers do not socially identify with black South Africans and the languages spoken by them. Msila (2021) blames this lack of social identity on historical realities where African languages were not tolerated in white schools, creating the marginalisation of indigenous languages. As a result, pre-service teachers are not motivated to learn indigenous languages as these negative attitudes interfere with and create challenges to their third and fourth language acquisition.

As language learning exposes one to the culture of the people speaking that language, pre-service teachers are inevitably exposed to the culture and practices of the indigenous language speakers. Hence, it can be concluded that conversational language enhances knowledge of

the culture of that group. More benefits emerge from this, in that it will create respect and positive attitudes towards fellow South Africans in and outside school environments. This way, diversity is embraced. Hikwa (2012) and Msila (2021) emphasise that African indigenous languages are custodians of indigenous knowledge systems embedded in them. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that exposure to indigenous languages like Conversational Sesotho at the university level is tantamount to exposure to the Sotho indigenous knowledge systems. This helps enhance the teaching experience as they will be required to solve problems and understand learner behaviours in and out of the classroom.

Msila (2021) sees the attitude against learning African languages as more of a legacy of historical social realities in which indigenous languages were marginalised. As a result, indigenous African languages in South Africa, such as Sesotho, struggle for recognition as they are considered not as prestigious as English and Afrikaans. We argue that the issue of negative attitudes towards learning African languages, such as Conversational Sesotho in institutions of higher learning, is situated within a broader problem of coloniality, which is beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say that this resulted from the colonial legacy that created the supremacy of the English and Afrikaans languages. This challenge can be approached in stages. First, an investigation into the causes of negative attitudes toward learning a third or fourth language at the university level can be undertaken. Only after ascertaining the causes can the institutions be in a better position to address them so that they are minimised, if not eliminated.

The findings show that third and fourth languages like Sesotho are used in a classroom for translating and code-switching. Therefore, due to these benefits, acquiring a third and fourth language has become mandatory for pre-service teachers. However, evidence reveals that teachers struggle to translate subject-specific concepts, such as those in mathematics and science (Cekiso et al., 2019; Muthivhi, 2011). We assert that exposure to modules such as Basic Conversational Sesotho and other indigenous languages is helpful in translation and code-switching but should include exposure to translating some of these basic concepts in the language. This will enhance the pedagogical function of indigenous languages in classroom settings and align indigenous language exposure with real classroom experiences.

Universities nationwide have been forced to redesign and implement new language policies that do away with colonial ideologies. This could partly be why some institutions introduce learning African languages only at the exit level. The implementation of the changes in language policies varies per institution. Higher education institutions and other academic platforms have recently advocated multilingualism instead of language monolingualism. Multilingualism empowers teachers, enabling them to use other official indigenous languages for effective teaching (Bock & Stroud, 2021; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023). Such pedagogical functions warrant concentrated efforts by universities to make sure that programs in place benefit the pre-service teachers maximally. We argue that the implementation of Conversational Sesotho, while a sound policy response when implemented as an exit module,

seems ad hoc. Conversational Sesotho should be implemented earlier than at the exit point of the student's academic life. More exposure to indigenous languages while still in higher education will ensure that pre-service teachers are adequately trained and can employ translanguaging confidently by drawing from a deeper range of their linguistic resources. Introducing an African language so late in the course reduces the potential advantages gained through its use by pre-service teachers.

Some pre-service teachers do not socially identify with black South Africans and the languages spoken by them. Msila (2021) blames this lack of social identity on historical realities where African languages were not tolerated in white schools, creating the marginalisation of indigenous languages. As a result, pre-service teachers are not motivated to learn indigenous languages as these negative attitudes interfere with and create challenges to their third and fourth language acquisition.

As language learning exposes one to the culture of the people speaking that language, pre-service teachers are inevitably exposed to the culture and practices of the indigenous language speakers. A study found pre-service teachers found it intriguing to be exposed to the isiZulu culture through learning the language. Hence, it can be concluded that a module such as Conversational Sesotho enhances knowledge of the culture of the Basotho-speaking native groups. More benefits emerge from this, in that it will create respect and positive attitudes towards fellow South Africans in and outside school environments. This way, diversity is embraced. Hikwa (2012) and Msila (2021) emphasise that African indigenous languages are custodians of indigenous knowledge systems embedded in them. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that exposure to indigenous languages like Conversational Sesotho at the university level is tantamount to exposure to the Sotho indigenous knowledge systems. This helps enhance the teaching experience as they will be required to solve problems and understand learner behaviours in and out of the classroom.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of learning an additional indigenous language at the institutional level in South Africa. Learning an additional language is an autonomous motivation, a means of being competent and striving to achieve goals, access better opportunities, and expand one's professional profile (Ryan & Deci, 2022). The study reveals that universities have been given a transformation mandate through the recognition of diversity. This involves the provision of intellectual usage of African languages. Some universities in South Africa earmarked Sesotho as a language of teaching and learning. Information gathered related three trends constituting language learning: a likelihood to provide either short or long-term benefits, autonomy and personal development may be boosted and acquisition of social needs. Ryan and Deci (2022) further attest that learning an additional language is an autonomous motivation to be competent and strive to achieve goals, access better opportunities, and expand their professional profile. We argue, however, that students do not understand that learning an additional language is a potential benefit

whereby they can see the world through a different lens. An additional language is an empowerment tool.

Preservice teachers must be encouraged to put more effort into learning the native languages. They should also be made aware of the benefits of learning an additional language as a prospective teacher and not be forced, as they usually say, to take any native language.

Within ten to twenty-five years, universities should formulate a plan that develops specific indigenous languages to the point that they are used in universities as a medium of instruction (Maki, 2023). It has been 19 years since the proposal, yet most South African universities are still not finding a foot in it. Therefore, the government should assist the institutions by sourcing experts whose speciality is the implementation of policies to enforce the needed implementation.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined students' challenges and benefits in Sesotho at a South African higher education institution. Grounded in functionalist theory, our systematic literature review revealed key issues: Students often lack motivation and commitment to learning Sesotho, mainly due to insufficient awareness of its significance as a third or fourth indigenous language. Furthermore, many students exhibit a strong sense of linguistic ownership, perceiving the requirement to learn another native language as a form of cultural imposition. Compounding these challenges, some universities fail to comply with language policy mandates, limiting the availability of additional indigenous language courses.

The studies emphasise that learning Sesotho offers various advantages, such as cultural enrichment, cognitive growth, and improved career prospects. These benefits underscore the significance of incorporating indigenous languages into teacher training and educational practices to foster more inclusive, fair, and impactful learning environments throughout South Africa.

Given South Africa's high mobility rate and the increasing multilingualism in classrooms—particularly in provinces such as Gauteng, the Free State, and Mpumalanga—teachers need to develop proficiency in multiple indigenous languages. A truly decolonised and Africanized education system requires educators who can engage with learners in their native languages, fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment. Beyond facilitating student comprehension, this initiative plays a crucial role in preserving African languages, which continue to decline in favour of English. Reversing this trend is imperative to protect and sustain the country's linguistic heritage.

To achieve this, universities must abandon a one-size-fits-all approach to language instruction. Instead of mandating a single indigenous language, institutions should offer students a broader selection, allowing them to choose based on their regional and professional needs.

Conflict of interests

Funding

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Appendix A: Studies included in the systematic review

Author(s)	Year	Method
Ajani & Khoalenyane	2023	Qualitative
Bock & Stroud	2021	Qualitative
Cekiso et al.	2019	Qualitative
Coetzee-de Vos	2019	Qualitative
Deutschmann & Zelime	2022	Qualitative
Garitty et al.	2022	Qualitative
Khoalenyane & Ajani	2023	Qualitative
Maki	2023	Qualitative
Maseko & Siziba	2023	Qualitative
Mbirimi-Hungwe	2023	Qualitative
Msila	2021	Qualitative
Nahidh, et al.	2023	Quantitative
Ngidi & Mncwango	2022	Qualitative
Puig-Mayenco, et al.	2020	Qualitative
Ratten	2023	Qualitative
Riady et al.	2020	Quantitative
Ryan & Deci	2022	Qualitative
Sobaih, et al.	2022	Qualitative
Cele	2021	Qualitative

Nkosi	2020	Qualitative
Cross et al.	2022	Qualitative
Ramothwala et al.	2022	Qualitative