ACADEMIC LITERACY THROUGH THE STUDENTS' LENSES: THE VOICES OF STUDENTS FROM A MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In education, a common emphasis across definitions of student voice is 'granting students the authority of their experiences as learners and their right to have a say in those experiences' (Rodgers 2018, 89). Student voice in teaching and learning has to do with the ownership of learning inclusion in the curriculum, so that there is engagement and meaningful learning (Parr & Hawe, 2022). The current study looks at the students' voices and perceptions about academic literacy offerings in Higher Education (HE) and their ability to critique Academic Literacy (AL) content in an English only curriculum through multilingual engagement. New Literacies Studies—NLS was used in this study as a useful theoretical lens for engaging with student perspectives and reflections on how they experienced integrated learning and the teaching of AL. The aim of the study was to explore student voices in the AL curriculum, their perceptions and how they would engage more effectively if the curriculum were presented in the languages of their choice. The study was conducted in one HE institution through the use of qualitative research methods. Two hundred multilingual students participated in the study. The results of the study indicate that in order to improve both linguistic and AL skills of students in HE, the curriculum must also be made available in the languages of students, thus accommodating a multilingual engagement and full participation across different linguistic backgrounds.

Keywords: Students' engagement, students' voices, students' perceptions, curriculum, multilingualism

AL through the students' lenses: the voices of students from a multilingual classroom

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There are four skills in English teaching and learning; they are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are categorized as receptive skills, while speaking and writing are productive skills. The writing skill is one of one productive skills that needs some competences, such as linguistic competence, getting the idea competence, and organizing the idea competence (Prastyo, 2014). At the core of these, linguistic skill is the inability for students to read and write due to their lack of AL skills

needed at HE levels, as a result, both of their reading and writing which is at frustration level (Valentos and Decano, 2021). Due to the linguistic challenges with reading and writing, students experience comprehension challenges in their studies. Reading comprehension plays a vital role in students' academic life, during school and beyond university life. This study focuses on students' voices in the teaching and learning of AL, with focus on a multilingual classroom in a South African context. Much of the research into the role of AL in HE in South Africa has included, and mostly focused on, the dominance of English as the language of instruction (van Schalkwyk, 2008:4). This is the case in English-speaking countries in Africa, especially in Southern Africa where the education system is available in English-only curricula.

Aiken (2023) is of the view that the Academic Literacies theory was originally devised amid a climate of widening participation. It could then be argued that there is little or no widening participation when the majority of students in a South African classrooms has minimal understanding of English as a language of teaching and learning. As argued by de Klerk (1992), Rudwick (2004), Pretorius and Matjila (2004), Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2004), Alimi (2011), Jawahar and Dempster (2013), Valentos and Decano (2021) and Gedik and Akyol (2022), AL goes beyond basic language skills, encompassing a set of social and cultural practices that are essential for the understanding and production of knowledge at the university level. This knowledge production and use are highly dependent on the students' comprehension skills and their ability to critique academic texts for scholarly use.

Teaching linguistic skills is of fundamental importance to the teaching of AL. In order for AL to be effectively implemented, it must cater for reading and writing skills of students and these skills must be grounded within the cognitive domain. This must involve the teaching and learning of comprehension skills with the focus on the application and synthesis of new knowledge across disciplines. Reading, which is defined as the process of making sense from texts and symbols, to be effective, must be handled as a fluent, sense-making, strategic, motivation-based, and lifelong process.

Gedik and Akyol (2022) argue the importance of reading and writing as fundamental in the development of linguistic skills and AL. They argue that that at tertiary level, writing is divided into various types: paragraph writing (basic writing), essay writing (intermediate writing), and academic writing (advanced writing). Focusing on fluent reading is the ability of the student to read the text at an appropriate speed. The two most important skills that affect fluent reading include word recognition and vocabulary knowledge. The inadequacy of these skills negatively affects the reading skills of students compared to their peers. Inadequacies in reading skills cause students to fall behind in terms of achievement in both reading and writing (Gedik and Akyol 2022: 23). Reading and writing are the key skills that are required from students so that they can navigate academic life without experiencing academic challenges. Reading and writing are two skills which students need in order to analyse, critique and produce their critical voice in the academic space. Without mastery of these skills, both their reading and writing are affected, and then their text analysis falls to a frustration level (Valentos and Decano 2021). This paper focuses on students' views of AL and offers inputs from students in terms of how they critique and understand AL, as well as where they feel they need to be supported the most. In soliciting students' views/voices, a qualitative framework approach was used.

Conceptual Framework

This article draws on conceptions of AL as defined by Gee (2015). The author argues that discourse in the AL context demonstrates 'distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking,

believing with other people and with various objects, tools and technologies' (Gee, 2015: 178-179). The AL classroom should be an interactive classroom where students actively participate and engage in everyday classroom debates. This will assist students to stimulate linguistic skills required for their academic lives. Cummins on the other hand (1996: 21-34) differentiates between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), the ability to use language in context-embedded situations where visible cues contribute to meaning-making and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). CALP relates to language being used in more cognitively demanding context-reduced situations such as academic writing, which is the subject of this article, where thought processes and writing development rely on abstract linguistic elements. These linguistic elements are crucial in the development of students' writings during and beyond academic life.

The other theory which underpins the study is the New Literacies Studies (NLS). NLS views literacy practices as socially constructed and embedded within a context (Gee 1990, 2003). This theory serves as a useful tool which serves as a guide in the students' journey of acquiring AL skills. The theory offers a theoretical lens which assists in the facilitation of AL skills and offers students' perspectives and reflections on how they experienced integrated learning and the teaching of AL. Applying this theory to the study enabled the exploration of the nuances of student perceptions, opinions, beliefs and expectations in the context of integrative learning and teaching of AL, while taking into consideration the socio-cultural context elements which might interfere with the teaching and learning of AL. Haggis defines socio-cultural elements in teaching as 'everything going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes' (Haggis, 2009:380).

Academic Practices that enable Students' Voice

Scholtz (2016) is of the view that AL, as an intermediary to knowledge in HE, is contingent on opportunities created for students to engage with text and other literacy modalities. In other words, the approach to AL in the various subjects of study at university, and lecturers' understanding of AL to access meaning, impact the teaching and learning context. French (2011) argues students' voices in AL need to be encouraged through giving students' tasks that will require interaction and engagement where students are encouraged to share drafts of their written work with each other and with the lecturer. This will allow them to engage in conversations about the purpose of the writing and their feelings about the writing process they are engaged in. Such practices will mostly assist them to share ideas, be part of the writing development and also to develop a skill for academic writing.

Parr and Hawe (2022) argue that voice is a term associated with a range of activities that basically involve the 'repositioning of students to facilitate their engagement with their teachers and schools' (Fleming 2015, 223). In theory students have a voice; however, in practice, factors such as relationship history, gender, class, race, appearance and achievement mediate the accessing of student views and the attention given to these views. It is argued (van Dyk and van de Poel, 2013) that for one to be considered academically literate, one has to be more than just able to read and write. Being academically literate is about being multiliterate and combining a range of abilities that are conducive to making meaning as well as mediating and negotiating knowledge. These include the use of the four linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, at both academic and social levels. These skills impact the use of knowledge as they postulate meaningful engagement with discourse communities in the form of practices, values, norms and a sharing of texts in the form of knowledge. Lillis and Scott (2007) have attempted to define this field, identifying literacy as a social practice, as the specific epistemology of academic literacies research and transformation as the ideology. This ideology is influenced by a number of factors,

such as socio-economic, political and historical realities; or the nature of access to HE. Literacy as a social practice also refers to the ability to make, mediate and negotiate meaning in specific contexts and for specific purposes. On the one hand, knowledge presupposes understanding and interacting with the academic community at large (van Dyk and van de Poel, 2013). Given the differing AL proficiency of first-year students as noted below, lecturers who teach at first-year level set the tone for expectations of literacy engagement for specific qualifications (Scholtz, 2016). Language, in fact, could be considered the cornerstone of literacy and literacy, in turn, is crucial for academic success which is the basis for this article, the AL, through a student is lens, refers to the way in which students critique, analyse and engage with AL content so that it makes sense to them in terms of what to expect in the module and how to critique knowledge for academic and scholarly use.

As argued by Parr and Hawe (2022:776), an encompassing view of the means by which student voices can be expressed includes through 'words, behaviour; actions; pauses in action; silences; body language; glances; movements; and artistic expressions'. In the case of teaching and learning in HE, student voices could be understood as an engagement of a learner with the texts or with the lecturer with an aim of arriving at a particular conclusion. The voice of students is pivotal in their reading and writing. Students' voices are not fixed or static, they are dynamic and students are agents in their own learning processes.

The mistakes that students make when constructing sentences are part of their learning process. Students must be encouraged to make those mistakes, as these mistakes are crucial steps in their learning processes. As Paxton (2012:390) argues, the writer develops his/her own unique voice by assimilating and reworking past and present discourses. The intellectual interest in student voices also stems from philosophical underpinnings of curricula, assessment and pedagogy in the context where there is a focus on teaching and learning acknowledging that students are not blank slates; that is, they have been shaped by society to think, believe and argue in a particular way based on the societal upbringing. Based on these arguments, teaching should be seen as a process of inquiry into how best the lecturers can meet student learning needs.

'Student voice in teaching and learning is linked to a complex combination of allied constructs. One of these is ownership of learning, which includes provision for input and choice (aspects of voice) as well as inclusion in the curriculum of that which is of particular interest to specific students; these factors are linked to engagement and meaningful learning (Parr and Hawe, 2022:778)'. Students' voices in HE are mostly associated with what they can say in their given assignments and tasks; in most cases it is the lecturer who has the voice. There is also a predetermined mentality on the students' part, that everything a lecturer says is true and should be treated as true at all times. This predetermined mentality is the one that make them have a shallow voice when it comes to academic debates. Student voices need to be viewed as a part of the teaching inquiry, which can promote continuous improvement when used efficiently, in that it is used as a teaching tool to effect questioning, reflection, and decision-making during teaching and learning of AL. In this way, one can also give feedback about students' learning experiences as a formal means of evaluating their AL skills.

Students' Academic Readiness for Higher Education in South Africa

Prastyo (2014) argues that students' readiness for HE lies in their understanding of linguistic skills such as reading and writing. The author argues that at a university level, writing is divided into paragraph writing (basic writing) essay writing (intermediate writing), and academic writing (advanced writing). Not all first-year students enrolled in South African universities, however, arrive at campuses equipped with

the same levels of awareness and preparedness to employ the AL practices that are needed for developing an academic argument (Eybers and Paulet, 2022:116). They argue that epistemology, as a philosophical branch concerned with ways of knowing, encapsulates the beliefs and theories that individuals come to hold about knowledge and knowing. When students come to HE, they bring with them cultural identities and persuasions. These identities influence the way in which knowledge is negotiated within the academic landscape, mostly between a lecturer and student and also when students engage with academic texts. It is vital to recognise that in the same ways that students possess multiple identities and discourses, so do they employ multiple epistemologies or ways of knowing in their attempts to make sense of the world. During the process of engagement, students need to have skills of critical engagement so they can critique academic texts without challenges. In most instances, students arrive at HE without having attained these skills at high school.

All these forms of writing are correlated with each other. This means that writing is a crucial form of art which students need to understand, so that they can easily navigate their different disciplines. Failure to understand reading and writing skills will make university life difficult. In her study, Prastyo (2014:104) discovered that the majority of first year students have difficulty to find the topic in a given comprehension text that they would like to write about, difficulty to construct a sentence, and as a result, have poor comprehension skills. Because of these challenges, Prastyo argues that lecturers and the students need materials that can cover those problems in writing class, in order that the target of learning basic academic writing (paragraph writing) can be achieved.

A study conducted by Scholtz in 2016, indicates that one-third of students entering HE (i.e. students deemed to be proficient) might be able to cope with the academic demands of first-year studies. Academic readiness for HE could be attributed to a number of factors such as socio-economic backgrounds, literacy challenges in the Foundation Phase (FP), poor teaching and learning practices in the FP, teacher qualifications and student-teacher ratios especially in quintile 1 to 3 government schools. The reality of the diverse school profile is that not all students might have been afforded optimal learning opportunities at primary and secondary school levels. The inequalities that exist in the SA education system indicate that the majority of students entering HE need optimal support to be academically literate. It is against this background that lecturers of AL need to cater for students' AL needs during the curriculum design and also through teaching and learning. Scholtz (2016:40) argues that:

> The gap between secondary and tertiary studies could be attributed to several factors: (1) school literacy focuses on literary genres, expository/narrative essays, recall and comprehension; (2) the low language admission requirement (i.e. a minimum of 30%) for diploma qualifications and (3) poor schooling opportunities and lack of resources in disadvantaged communities.

The majority of students enter HE with no knowledge of what to expect in terms of teaching and learning. They are not familiar with writing styles and ways of engaging with texts; as a result, they struggle to find their voice and also with what is expected from them in terms of reading and writing. According to Bharuthram and McKenna (2013:1), in order for these students to acquire the practices required for HE success, they need to be taught about their roles and what is expected from them in terms of teaching and learning and how they should write at university level. The academic demands set for them need to be made explicit, as the processes of reading and writing are thus not seen as technical literacy skills, but as being intricately entwined with the people doing the reading and writing. As a result, students need to

learn to use socially appropriate language to convey content through the genres of their discipline; they cannot do these through osmosis, but through formal teaching and learning of AL components which will enable them to critique academic texts without challenges. As Bourdieu and Passeron argue, 'academic language is no-one's mother tongue' (1977,115, quoted in French 2011). It should be noted and understood within the academic space that in order for students to navigate well within the academic space, academic language plays a major impact in their success, not only with AL but with other academic subjects as well. This is because all fields of study employ academic language. This then will make the construction of knowledge in terms of reading and writing very difficult if students struggle with AL. Beekman, Dube, Potgieter and Underhill (2016:13) argue that reading and writing in HE require highly developed cognitive skills. There are various reading and writing styles, different strategies to follow and several techniques that can be applied as academic reading and writing are based on effective thinking. Students need to be introduced to various reading strategies so that they sharpen their reading and writing techniques and achieve better results in their studies.

The issue of a classroom used for teaching and learning is also a challenge in our education system. Even though we are in the realm of Learning Management Systems (LMS) where most of our teachings involve the use of technology and have online presence, we are still facing the reality of large classes. Schalkwyk (2008:54) argues that large classes in most universities in Southern Africa seem to be intimidating for first year students. The author argues that the teaching and learning of first year classes is characterised by a number of factors, which include, among others, limited resources to teach, and that the ever-increasing size of first-year classes presents many daunting challenges, and places additional demands on students understanding of content and AL skills offered in a language which they are still learning, and have not yet mastered. While there is an increase of students annually in an AL classroom in tertiary institutions, there is also a challenge in terms of the student-lecturer ratio, resources, facilities and capacity which has an impact on the teaching and learning of AL. These are determining factors in the way teaching is being conceptualised at first-year level by different universities in Southern Africa.

Looking at the PIRLS (2021) report, it is evident that the teaching philosophies that exist in state schools and private schools need improvement to grant learners better access and to cope with the demands of HE. The PIRLS report shows deficiencies in terms of learners' ability to master literacy and numeracy compared to learners of other countries. Due to this deficiency, the majority of learners experience challenges with the mastery of texts from the primary and secondary level. These deficiencies impact negatively on their academic careers as some do not even make it to tertiary levels due to low pass scores and low numeracy and literacy scores.

The Views of Students from a Multilingual Context

In a study conducted by Pinheiro, Dionísio, and Vasconcelos (2016), it was found that students identify specific texts of their academic subject content (40,9%) and supporting documents of the classes, such as PPTs (27,3%). The same kind of document is referred to when they are asked about the texts that teachers recommend more frequently for reading (50%).

A study conducted by Botha (2022) indicated that academic texts are not the most favoured by students due to their difficulty in terms of reading and understanding. Students reported that the text types they read most frequently include academic research articles, workshop/lecture handouts, textbooks and academic reports, and struggle to analyse and use them for academic purposes. In the same study, students reported that their most frequent writing tasks included academic essays, research essays, reports,

personal reflections, case study analyses, critiques, personal statements, laboratory reports, technical and scientific reports, cover letters and resumes, and applications for scholarship. Botha (2022) argues that a genre of reading academic research articles poses difficulty to students compared with a university textbook. In the study conducted, it was reported that students experience greatest difficulty in reading academic articles and research articles, with some 75% of students reporting having difficulty in reading such texts. Lower levels of difficulty were also reported in the reading of academic reports, textbooks, course handouts, academic magazines, student reports and laboratory manuals. It was only five percent of students who reported that they prefer reading academic materials in languages other than English. In a study conducted by Azizan, Abdullah, Anuar and Maznun (2022), it was discovered that students were reported to be fluent in speaking and in terms of writing performance and their achievements were seen to be from the usage of vocabulary and their ability to critique texts it is through their understanding of reading and writing skills that they are enabled to participate better in academic tasks.

Azizan et. al. (2022) in their study discovered that the majority of the students' responses with regard to the use of mind map in their writing were positive, and they stated that creating the mind-map was not difficult, the process was enjoyable, the mind map helped them to organize their thoughts and facilitated their understanding of the concepts and ideas which allowed creativity in writing. Botha (2022) argues that students need to write texts closer to those that they encounter in classes. This specificity extends to reading, being a cause of difficulties, in particular when thesis, dissertations, technical books/texts, and scientific articles are concerned, or conceptual mediators, because they serve to acquire, to build or expand knowledge and meta knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on the Qualitative research approach as a research method. Qualitative research method is defined as a research technique that allows researchers to learn about "nonquantifiable phenomena such as people's experiences, languages, histories, and cultures" (Bhangu et al., 2023: 39). The researchers chose this method as it allows them to explore students' views and experiences with AL in HE.

In this study, the target population was students in HE who have taken AL, which warranted the use of the purposive sampling method. As the name suggests, purposive sampling is the process of selecting participants who have the information that researchers are looking for. In other words, it is used to "access knowledgeable people" (Cohen *et. al*., 2018:219). This meant that the researchers purposely chose these participants as they can have the answers to their questions, thus improving the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings. A sample size of 200 students was taken and these were students who had taken the module for at least six months, which meant that they would give useful and relevant information.

The research used semi-structured interviews with students in order to give pre-eminence to 'student voice', understood in the context of this research as student responses in relation to their views pertaining to the AL module in a South African university. A questionnaire was also used to solicit their understanding and how they critique information related to AL, and how AL as a module equips them with various skills that assist them to navigate their other academic modules. The use of this method was to allow the researchers to capture the participants' experiences and opinions as they describe them, free of limitations caused by fixed-response questions. This data was then analysed by means of thematic analysis, which is defined as "a method of detecting central terms" in order to understand the data

(Alahou, 2023:32). This implies that the researchers went through the dataset to detect similar thoughts and experiences from students and grouped them into themes.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The researchers set out to explore students' voices in the AL curriculum, their perceptions and how they would engage more effectively if the curriculum were presented in the languages of their choice. It was found that students believe that the curriculum should be made available in the languages of their choice to accommodate a multilingual engagement and full participation. The researchers captured students' overall understanding of AL, their perceptions of the content, their preferred methods of delivery and linguistic preferences for delivery of the content.

(i) Overall Understanding of AL
Conceptual understanding is crucial in every teaching and learning setting as it allows for knowledge transfer. Mills (2016:546) defines this as the process of "understanding concepts as opposed to memorizing content". This can be understood in this context as understanding the concept of AL as a skill that can be applied in different disciplines and research focus. Mills further argues that "the more knowledge is connected to other knowledge and the stronger these connections become, the more likely a subject is to be understood" (2016:550). This means that students should learn to apply these skills in different contexts. This led to the need to find out if students understood the concept of AL.

The researchers asked students to give a definition of AL. 11% of the students showed a lack of understanding in their responses, which most of them confusing it with English. One participant mentioned that:

 "AL is grammar, linguistic competence and communication in the English language".

This indicates that some students who are in HE do not have a clear understanding of AL and what it entails, even after taking the module. However, it is important to note that 89% of students demonstrated understanding of what AL. Some of them stated that:

"It is the skills needed to read, comprehend, produce and critically assess academic content".

This implies that the majority of the students understand that AL goes beyond linguistic abilities.

When students enter the academic space, they select their preferred disciplines and often have core and elective modules. This means that they consider some modules relevant and others less relevant to their needs. However, AL remains a relevant module as it is required for their academic journey. According to Castillo-Martínez et al. (2023), these skills include efficiently searching for information, comprehension of texts in their chosen disciplines and academic correctness of their writing. Students take this module to prepare for their studies, as research reading and writing become more pronounced as they progress in their respective disciplines. Researchers sought to understand if students understood the relevance of this module and found that most students understood the importance and relevance of critical reading and writing in university. Some participants stated that they needed these skills to advance their reading and writing especially for research purposes.

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(ii) Perceptions of Module Content

When students arrive at tertiary institutions, they are introduced to new subjects and new terms. If proper research is not done on what these new terms mean, misconceptions can easily occur. Misconceptions play a huge role in students undermining some modules which interferes with their learning. In this context, students confuse AL with English and tend to undermine the module, leading to them not fully gaining the skills necessary for their academic success. It was important for researchers to find out what initial perceptions students had when taking the module, and the most prevalent response was:

"It is reading and writing in the English language".

This proves that it is important for lecturers to ensure that students understand what AL is and its role in their academic journey. This will ensure that students are able to appreciate the content and engage with it.

It is important to note that students who have just joined HE institutions are dependant on lecturers for information and this means that they hardly do research by themselves. This implies that, in this context, the misconceptions they may have on the module would impact the kind of content that they expect. It is crucial for this study to understand what content students expected as well as their view on the existing content. When asked what content they believe should be present in the module, 21% of students mentioned content such as grammar and punctuation in writing, formal speaking and learning of different languages. This further demonstrates how students confuse AL with English as a language. It is quite concerning that these students had taken the module for a least six months and still could not identify the fundamental differences between the two subjects.

Conversely, 79% of students were satisfied with the content, highlighting that it allows them to develop their AL skills. One participant indicated that *"the module has assisted in building my skills in reading for comprehension and critically engaging with academic content".* This is a clear indication that some students understand the outcomes of the module and are able to link that to the content of the module. In a quest to further understand their experience with the module, researchers asked students whether the module content was difficult and which specific sections were challenging for them. The most prevalent response (83%) was that the module is not difficult. One of the students said that:

"The content is not difficult as we receive enough resources and guidance to understand and apply these skills".

In contrast, a common response from a minority of 11% was that it is difficult and that they find it difficult to answer questions during assessments while some students (6%) said that the content is neither difficult nor easy for them. They added that they do understand the content, but it is incorporating these skills into their own writing that is difficult. This indicates that some of the students fail to transfer these skills to different settings and research focus, which highlights their lack of knowledge application. However, it is also important to note that these students do not have much time in class with a lecturer, and they are still adapting to the fast-paced nature of university studies. This could be a contributing factor to their challenges.

(iii) Preferred Methods of Content Delivery

Students learn differently and their preferences help lecturers plan their lessons in a way that will allow for maximum engagement. Therefore, it is important to understand their preferences for content delivery.

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Researchers asked the students about their preferred method of content delivery and among all their responses, a hybrid approach was noted as preferable. 17% of these students prefer purely online learning for this module. According to some of the participants:*"Online classes, online assessments and no contact classes would be best for this module"*. A further 45% indicated that online and contact lessons were sufficient for their learning and indicated that: "*We have an opportunity to ask further questions from the lecturer after studying the online content"*. This is in line with findings from a study conducted by Canada et al. (2021), which indicated that students who have contact classes ask more questions and thus prompts further opportunity for the lecturer to explain concepts and demonstrate skills that would otherwise be harder to grasp online. Other students (38%) suggested the use of educational games, videos and quizzes to present the content. This further solidifies their preference for online approaches to content delivery.

(iv)   Preferred Language of Instruction for Multilingual Classroom
In South African HE institutions, the discourse around languages of instruction has been growing. This study sought to uncover students' preferences regarding the language of instruction in AL modules, especially in a multilingual classroom. 85% of students they that students should be given an opportunity to choose the language that they would be comfortable in. One participant said: *"Many students are fluent in English; however, that does not apply to everyone as some cannot express themselves in English as it is a second or third language to them. Everyone needs equal opportunities so I think that we should have options."*

This is in contrast with the 15% of students who prefer English, as they believe it is a universal language and will help ease language barriers. One participant mentioned that: *"English since we all speak different languages and English that I think we can all understand. This will avoid language barriers, and it is the most spoken language in academics."*

Evidently, the majority of these students believe that to improve their linguistic and AL skills, the curriculum should be made available in the languages of their choice to accommodate the multilingual classroom. When asked to substantiate their answer, among their answers was the notion that it will ensure equality and allow for code-switching opportunities. Code-switching has been identified as one strategy that teachers use to further explain concepts to students in high school, especially in public schools.

Another area of concern identified relates to students' perceived difficulties in expressing themselves in their classrooms, with their classmates and with their teachers, as this involves speaking in a second or third language. This is most evident with 64% of students expressing difficulty communicating with their teachers, and a further 56% of students stating they had difficulty communicating with their classmates about academic matters. Furthermore, 50% stated they needed help expressing their ideas in their tutorials and seminars, while 34% stated they seldom or never asked their teachers questions in class. These findings, together with the high levels of self-reported social anxiety (43%) and shyness (36%), among others, indicate that students are not very confident discussing academic matters in their tutorials, lectures and seminars at the university. It is worth noting that according to this particular institution's statistical records, 61% of students are African students, and we can assume that these students are second language speakers of English, and that they also speak a variety of indigenous languages.

Interpretation of data

The purpose of this study was to discover perceptions of students about AL offerings in HE and their ability to critique AL content in an English only curriculum through multilingual engagement.

Researchers have identified four perspectives from which we can look at AL in HE. The first one is the overall understanding of AL. When students are confronted with the demands of HE, they are required to learn AL skills in order to merge into the academic community. This may pose difficulty for students who do not understand what AL is and why they need it for their academic careers. The study has revealed that most of the students have a clear understanding of the module and what it entails, although some still confuse it with linguistic skills required for communication in the English. Considering that AL is an application-based module and requires that the skills learned be transferred to different contexts, it is disappointing that some students lack the conceptual understanding of AL and therefore cannot transfer the knowledge into different contexts, even after having completed the requirements of this module.

The second perspective derives from conceptual understanding and goes into the students' expectations of the module concept. The results of this study showed that students do not understand what AL is and therefore make misconceptions that hinder their learning process. This leads to the confusion regarding what content they need in this module. Considering that this study was conducted in an institution where this module is only offered to first-year students, it can be understood in this context that students are still navigating the workings of university and are dependent on lecturers for information. If unattended, students keep their wrong perceptions about the module, causing either further confusion about this module or they undermine it, thinking that it is the English that they wrote and read in high school.

The third perspective is their preferred method of content delivery. When the world was confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, unexpected and swift changes were pertinent for all industries. Academia was no different; measures had to be put in place to allow for the continuation of studies which led to the emergency integration of online teaching and learning (Bond et al., 2021). This method gained momentum as students and teachers navigated the online space and discovered advantages to it. In this particular institution where this study was conducted, a hybrid teaching method is currently used for teaching and learning. This means that students have access to online content, and they also have contact sessions with the lecturers. Participants reported that this allows for clarity of information and practice sessions, as practice is required when developing a skill. Students seem to enjoy this method of delivery as it allows them time for further questions and engagement if they are struggling with a topic or section. With the growth of people choosing to work online, more people prefer remote jobs and remote courses in education institutions. This marks a positive shift in industry as more employers have started embracing remote work.

Finally, language of instruction in a multilingual classroom is of utmost importance. It has been proven that AL can be built in any language, and this means that indigenous languages can also be integrated into academia. Participants have suggested that they believe that everyone should be given a chance to choose the language in which they learn AL. This gave rise to the concept of code-switching, and this means that classes would have to be separated according to language needs of students. Research has shown that learning in your own language is beneficial as students gain confidence in engaging with the material. It has therefore been suggested that AL content be made available in different indigenous languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS
(i)   Reading and Writing Support

A simple and direct solution to improve the reading abilities of students would be for teaching staff to assign academic reading materials relevant to students' level of study; for example, assigning readings from textbooks and chapters in books would assist students to more easily penetrate their subject-specific learning materials, and more directly and adequately benefit their learning. Another solution would be to incorporate more textbook and book chapter materials in the core AL courses at the institution, and to focus teaching pedagogy in these courses on teaching students' global comprehension skills related to their assigned readings at university (Botha, 2022:15). This can also be done with language-specific resources as well. The university could provide translated material to ensure that all students are catered for. This means that they can access learning resources and content material in the language of their choice.

(ii)   Task-Based Teaching

Solutions to remedy the situation of students' discomfort in expressing themselves in classrooms, could we more task-based teaching methodologies could be utilised in students' classrooms more broadly at the institution, and for teachers to require more active engagement from students in their classes. In AL courses, flipped or blended teaching methods could be used, whereby classroom time could be utilised for discussion and peer or group-based tasks, thereby encouraging more engagement during class (Botha, 2022:16). The findings presented in this study above highlight this need, and indicate that there are a number of challenges regarding AL instruction that need to be overcome for students to more directly benefit from their studies in HE.

CONCLUSION

This research was focused on finding out what perceptions students have about AL in a multilingual classroom. It was found that students believe in having a choice in the language that they learn AL and that it should have a hybrid style of content delivery. Although students understood the concept of AL, application was still a challenge. This could suggest the need for more time to develop these skills and ensure their success. The results of this study offer useful insights into what students think of the module, and provides suggestions for improvement for both lecturers and students. Student perceptions are crucial for the improvement of their experiences at university and should therefore be considered when developing content.

There is a need for a supportive learning environment, where students can voice their concerns when they feel they are neglected within the AL programme. One of the struggles students experience is the issue of voice. Their voices are not heard. This is as a result of power issues where a lecturer has more 'power' over students inside the classroom; as a result, students feel obliged to listen to what the lecturer says because the lecturer has more knowledge of the discipline than students. These power relations impact teaching and learning as students feel shy to ask questions, scared to engage with the lecturer, and unable to fully participate in classroom discourse. These challenges can be overcome by encouraging reflective practices which involve students in their learning through multilingual practices, and clear and consistent academic feedback and engagements. Social and academic support programmes will assist struggling students cope with university life. In this way, even if they come underprepared for HE, through support, both social and academic, they are likely to develop a positive attitude towards about their studies. In the long run, such support will assist in closing the 'power' gap and assist in self-regulated and self-directed

learning. Based on the results of this study, students develop negative perceptions about AL because they are not fully involved in the process.

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