4. THE USEFULNESS OF LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRES FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS AT THE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MANAGEMENT (IUM) IN NAMIBIA Beven Kamwi

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the views held by newcomer students regarding the functions of their linguistic repertoires in helping them achieve social integration and academic success at the International University of Management (IUM) in Namibia. This qualitative study used interviews as a data collection method. Data were collected from 44 first-year students in their second semester at IUM across faculties. Interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed. The findings revealed that the students are multilingual, on average speaking three languages. English is the most widely used language, as it is the medium of instruction at IUM, followed by Oshiwambo and Afrikaans. Other African and foreign languages also form part of the students' linguistic repertoires and are mainly used in informal settings. It further revealed that students expected their linguistic repertoire to help them achieve social integration and academic success at university, before and after joining the institution. Specifically, proficiency in English is seen as valuable for social and scholarly purposes. Even though the students attend an officially all-English university and have a range of (in some cases) mutually unintelligible L1S, they find their L1S useful for both social integration and achieving academic success.

Keywords: *linguistic repertoire, multilingualism, social integration, academic success*

INTRODUCTION

This paper examined students' views about the functions of their linguistic repertoires for achieving academic success and social integration at a Namibian private university, the International University of Management (IUM). Many universities across the world are microcosms of culturally plural societies, as they accommodate students who are diverse in terms of language, race, gender, culture, religion, and socioeconomic status. As a result of this cultural and linguistic diversity, many students may be linguistically inadequately prepared for the language of instruction and communication in higher education (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2018). The IUM has over 10,000 local and international students and uses English as its sole medium of instruction (MoI) (IUM, 2017). No official demographics are available on the languages of the IUM student population, but the university is home to several domestic students whose first languages (L1s) are indigenous Namibian languages (e.g., Nama/Damara, Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, Rukavango, Rukwangali, Silozi or Afrikaans). Several foreign languages are also represented at the university (IUM, 2017). The author, a lecturer at the time of conducting the research, observed students speaking non-Namibian African and foreign languages, mostly in informal domains on and around campus. These languages include English, Portuguese (mainly by Angolan students), Shona (by Zimbabwean students), and Kiswahili (by students from the Great Lakes region). Bam (2016), who studied the linguistic repertoires

of second-year students at the Vaal University of Technology in South Africa, found that 10% of her participants were bilingual and 90% multilingual. Bam's participants, on average, spoke four languages, but some spoke up to 10.

Several studies have focused on the correlations between English proficiency, social adjustment, and academic achievement in Australia and the United States of America (for example, Andrade, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2010). However, none of these studies have explored the profile of students' linguistic repertoires, nor did any address the functionality of the students' linguistic repertoires to their social and academic integration, particularly in the Namibian context. I could trace only one study (Shiweda, 2013) that topicalised multilingual repertoires in a tertiary educational setting in Namibia. This study, however, focused on multilingual communication (predominantly code-switching) in the classrooms and not on the students' self-expected and perceived preparedness for communication in the classroom and social settings. Different notions of code-switching, albeit translanguaging, have been put forth. Gumperz (1982, p. 59) defines code-switching (CS) as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems". Some (Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Zhou & Wei, 2007) viewed CS as the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation. Thus, the study aims to contribute to the existing body of work by investigating students' perceptions of the functionality of their linguistic repertoire to facilitate their academic success and social integration at university.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Linguistic repertoire

As the current research is concerned with students' views on the functions of their linguistic repertoire in succeeding academically and socially, the concept of 'linguistic repertoire and relevant aspects related to it are discussed. The terms "linguistic repertoire", "code repertoire", and "verbal repertoire" are used interchangeably to refer to the totality of the languages in a speaker's command which they can use in line with what they wish to attain or convey (Kachru, 1982, p. 25). Similarly, Blommaert and Backus (2013, p. 11) define "linguistic repertoire" as the "totality of linguistic resources including both invariant forms and variables" that are available to members of a particular community. Busch (2012, p. 504) refers to "linguistic repertoire" as "verbal repertoire" and views it as referring to linguistic forms or styles associated with a given speech community, which serve as means for daily interactions. This reflects a situation in which speech community members have linguistic resources at their disposal that they can use to suit their intentions or communication needs in their respective social and other settings. Benor (2010, p. 2) defines "linguistic repertoire" as "a set of language varieties used by a given speaker or community". Benor (2010) extended her discussion of linguistic repertoire to include what she terms "distinctive linguistic repertoire" (alternatively, "ethnolinguistic repertoire"), which denotes a set of language tools that interlocutors sharing a similar culture can use to their advantage. To that effect, the concept of 'ethnolinguistic repertoire' considers language as an important function in the establishment of interlocutors' social class, meaning that speakers rely on their linguistic resources to identify themselves with specific interlocutors and to be distinctive from others. In D'warte's (2014, p. 21) view, the linguistic repertoire is the total complex of linguistic resources available to speakers to use in different social contexts and within communities.

English as lingua franca (ELF) and its use in the classroom

English is a widely used language, and it is commonly incorporated into school curricula in many parts of

the world (Yano, 2009). For the majority across international borders, English is increasingly becoming a lingua franca. A lingua franca is the language of communication between people who do not share a common native language of communication (Lewandowska, 2019). Leichsenring et al. (2015) note that a lingua franca has no native speakers, but that all its speakers must learn to use it. In line with the definition, any speaker using English to communicate with a speaker of a different L1, in principle, speaks ELF. Jenkins (2012) examined some of the misconceptions about ELF, and Jenkins' study viewed ELF in the context of a transactional language that enables linguistically diverse speakers to have purposeful interaction. The scholar observed two things that are of interest to the current study. First, although students from a diverse range of L1 backgrounds learned the English rules that she taught them in her English classes, they did not seem to apply them in naturalistic conversations. When conversing amongst themselves in and outside of the classroom, they made use of forms that appeared to be influenced by their respective mother tongues and by "factors related to English" (Jenkins, 2012, p. 487). Second, the use of these ungrammatical forms did not hamper effective communication, whether inside or outside the classroom. The ELF users also reverted to languages other than English to culturally identify themselves and show solidarity with the speaker (Jenkins, 2012).

Linguistic resource and social integration

Social integration is a process by which people can immerse themselves in a new community. Thus, it involves gaining access to positions and social status, learning a new culture, acquiring rights and obligations, building personal relationships with members of the host society, and forming a feeling of belonging to, and identification with that society (Shoma, 2021). Bosswick and Heckmann (2007) view social integration as a process of building personal relationships with members of the host community and forming a feeling of identification and belonging with the host community. Language is an essential tool for social integration. This means that there can be no genuine social integration without language. Studies have shown that language is one of the most important social obstacles for most immigrants, particularly those who live in places where they do not speak the same language. For example, Ambang (2023) explores immigrants' perspectives on the role of language competence during integration in the Finnish context. The research results suggest that language competence is a gateway to political and social participation, employment opportunities, better health, and survival in everyday living, all of which are needed to integrate into society. The results also show that although some challenges are experienced while learning Finnish, there are also factors that keep immigrants motivated during this process. Some suggestions are made to improve learning outcomes, but further research is needed to explore this area (Ambang, 2023). Similarly, in the context of the IUM, freshmen language competency is considered capital because it can facilitate their social and educational integration.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The overarching aim of the study was to examine first-year students' perceptions and expectations regarding how their linguistic repertoires help them achieve social integration and academic success at the IUM, a private university in Namibia. Thus, the following sub-objectives guided the study:

- To explore the nature of the linguistic repertoires of the students at the IUM who do not have the language of instruction as L1
- To assess the functions of the IUM students' linguistic repertoire on their social integration and academic success

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted a descriptive case study to describe the value of linguistic repertoire for

social integration and academic success. After obtaining ethical clearance, institutional permission, and informed participant consent, data to inform the research questions were collected from 44 first-year students at the beginning of their second semester at IUM. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Interviews were conducted in the university setting, and each interview lasted 15 to 20 minutes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to analyse, summarise, and report the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The analysis followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interview sessions were audio-recorded. After the interview, the data were listened to several times and manually transcribed. Then, significant responses were identified, coded, and categorised under key themes formulated through the reviewed literature and research objectives. Finally, the main themes were discussed and interpreted, and conclusions were drawn. Trustworthiness was ensured throughout the data collection and analysis process. Likewise, ethical procedures for conducting research were strictly observed, including seeking informed consent and assigning pseudonyms (nicknames) to participants for confidentiality.

FINDINGS

The study investigated the nature of linguistic repertoires of the students at the IUM who do not have the language of instruction as L1 and the functions of their linguistic repertoires in helping them achieve social integration and academic success. The findings are presented based on the stated research objectives.

Research Objective 1: The nature of the linguistic repertoire of the students at the IUM

The first research objective explored students' linguistic repertoire. From the data analysed, one distinct theme summarising the linguistic repertoires was identified, with detailed insights into these themes provided.

Theme 1: Students use different languages in different domains

The findings revealed that students utilised multiple languages. For instance, Errol reported being multilingual, as he could speak four languages depending on the context. He indicated that he uses English in lessons but Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, and Afrikaans in non-academic domains. Wilbard, an English-Afrikaans bilingual, reported using English most of the time but also speaking "his language" (Afrikaans) to his friends, stating, "We are from the same place." Tuli, whose L1 is the dominant Oshiwambo language, reported that she relied mainly on her L1 to interact with friends and other people with whom she shares the same language while reverting to English during lessons and when seeking support from the administrative staff, because "*Everyone knows English, the official language in Namibia"*. Musa agreed: *"As for me, it is English in class and Oshiwambo when I meet friends".* Tangi claimed to use English during lectures only, his L1 Otjiherero to peers, Afrikaans to other students who do not speak Otjiherero, and a mixed code of the mentioned languages when the need arose. Oiva, a student from DRC, strictly relied on English in all domains, saying, "Being a foreigner, I don't speak any Namibian language except English." Her other languages, Kiswahili (L1) and French (L2), can only be used at home with family members, not on campus.

Research Objective 2: The functions of students' linguistic repertoire for social integration and academic success

Another key focus of this study was to explore how useful the students' linguistic repertoires were in facilitating social integration and academic success. Five themes emerged, as provided below. Detailed information on these themes is presented.

Theme 1: One needs English to succeed in their studies

Many participants reported that one "of course" or "obviously" needs English to succeed academically at IUM because all courses are taught only in English. As stated by Oiva, "I grew up speaking French because I am from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and they don't use it [English] for lessons there. I only learned English when I arrived in Namibia. Because of this, I struggled to cope in my studies". Nangula stated that her speaking, writing and reading skills in English as well as in Oshiwambo were beneficial to her in as far as academic progress was concerned: "At times I would also use my language to people I know from high school, especially if I don't understand a particular thing in class, I would ask it in my mother tongue". However, she also clearly stated, "I would say, 'No English, no progress'".

Theme 2: One needs English to socialise with others (but English alone is not always enough)
Participants indicated that English is beneficial for social interaction and that knowledge of English does assist one socially. Consider, for instance, the last part of Errol's comment: *"If I realise one does not speak the local languages, I will approach them in English and will get along fine".* However, English alone appeared insufficient to settle in optimally at IUM. Oshiwambo was commonly mentioned as socially useful. Consider Nangula, an English-Oshiwambo bilingual, who stated that both her languages are beneficial socially, because *"most people understand the two languages, so I could speak with anyone using the two languages"*. Indeed, students expect other students to be able to converse in more than one language. Oiva, a foreign student, stated, *"like when I came to Namibia…speak [English] to anyone…class or outside. But…but…sometimes some students want to talk to me in their languages. I tell them I don't understand, and they funnily look at me. Yah, I'm used now"*. Mweti, a Namibian who has Silozi as L1, stated that he was learning other languages for non-academic purposes, to integrate socially: *"now that I'm at IUM for a while I'm learning how to greet in Oshiwambo and Afrikaans through my classmates – yah, they laugh at me, but I feel to be part of them than before"*. Mweti believes that being knowledgeable in English alone is good for one's academic work but inadequate for social adjustment at university.

Theme 3: Being multilingual facilitates student social integration
The study also revealed the languages that participants thought, after a few months' stay on campus, helped them settle in socially. In this regard, Musa responded that it was mostly his L1, Oshikwanyama (a variety of Oshiwambo), and, to some extent, his English that were helpful socially. Oshikwanyama, for instance, allowed him to socially adjust, as he would use the language to socialise with peers he knew before coming to IUM as well as with other students who were conversant in any of the varieties of Oshiwambo. In addition, he would use English to interact with people from other languages or cultural groups. Thus, depending on the circumstances, he could switch between these two languages to overcome communication barriers: *"I could use both languages any time"*. Tuli stated*, "My ability to speak three languages, such as English, Oshiwambo, and Afrikaans, is because everyone on campus understands English and most of my friends are conversant in Afrikaans and Oshiwambo."* Nangula stated that as time passed, she made friends from other language groups, with whom she spoke English, after at first *"Hang[ing] with people that I came with from my high school or region that I already know and share the same language with. It's only as time went on that I started finding friends from other cultural groups to whom I started using English more to communicate"*.

Theme 4: Knowledge in certain languages is worth more than others
All participants were at least bilingual, but many believed their language combinations were not optimal or that their proficiency in some languages in their repertoires was inadequate for social adjustment. For

instance, Mweti was indeed bilingual, but the language he knew apart from English was the "wrong" language for the IUM context. His Silozi L1 hardly has a speech community on campus ("You hardly find a person speaking Silozi on campus, very few, so I am forced to learn other people's languages"). In addition, he mentioned that his lack of proficiency in widely used local languages like Oshiwambo and Afrikaans was also a hindrance because, according to him, most interactions among the university community take place in Afrikaans and Oshiwambo. Tangi also felt that merely being bilingual was not sufficient: *"I'm only limited to two languages, which is quite a problem when it comes to interacting with others who are not speakers of my mother tongue"*. For Musa, a speaker of English and the widely spoken Oshiwambo (i.e., of the "right" languages in the IUM context), not speaking Afrikaans proved challenging because, in his view, he could not hold conversations with most students and therefore felt left out. Tangi, who spoke two languages (namely English and Oshiwambo), felt that being an English-Oshiwambo bilingual was inadequate for optimal social adjustment. A recurring theme was that Afrikaans, in addition to English and Oshiwambo, is required for good social integration at the IUM. Oiva, who hails from a French-speaking country, admitted that her limited command of English as a lingua franca and MoI in her host country hindered both her social adjustment and academic achievement at the IUM. Although being bilingual and in the process of becoming trilingual, her L1 and L2 were not of use socially, and her English proficiency was not yet good: *"As a foreign student, I can only communicate in English, so it was not easy for me to make friends with other students 'cause they only accommodated people with whom they can speak the same languages with, like Afrikaans and others".* She added, *"I only speak English. Sometimes I am lonely because I cannot make friends as much as I would like."*

Theme 5: Students think that their knowledge of English and local languages needs to improve for them to function academically at the IUM

Several participants mentioned that they either wanted to or felt compelled to improve their proficiency in certain languages to improve their academic and/or social functioning. Mweti, for instance, mentioned that he is *"forced to learn other people's languages, like Afrikaans and Oshiwambo".* Musa also spoke about learning Afrikaans: *"I think I don't know how to speak Afrikaans, but other students do, so I stay away and feel shy to hang with them. As a result, I want to learn it."* Oiva, the student from the DRC, expressed the need to learn some local languages for easy social adjustment to university life: *"I think I need to learn some languages used in Namibia".* Wilbard, an Afrikaans-English bilingual who speaks both languages, thought that learning Oshiwambo would be beneficial for social integration and stated that it would improve his chances of fitting into campus life. As Wilbard said about Oshiwambo, *"It's like second to English".*

DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the findings are discussed to address the research objectives. Regarding the first research objective, which concerned the nature of the linguistic repertoires of students at IUM, the results show that IUM is home to students from different language backgrounds and nationalities who share one lingual means of academic communication: English. The dominance of Oshiwambo as L1 was expected, given that half of Namibia's population is part of the Aawambo ethnic group hailing from the four so-called "O regions" in northern Namibia, namely Oshana, Omusati, Otjikoto, and Ohangwena. As for L2 statistics, English is the most common L2 amongst IUM students, spoken as L2 by most of the participants. English is the most common L2 among students because it is the MoI in Namibian schools, and most participants were Namibians who received their school education in Namibia. However, English is also the sole MoI at IUM and the lingua franca of the university, so even students who did not speak English before

entering IUM had to learn English to study there. It was therefore expected that all participants would have some command of English, and the data supported this expectation. Furthermore, because multilingualism prevails at IUM, students can use their languages in different domains. English appears to be the highly preferred language, for instance in formal settings like lectures, individual interaction with administrative staff or lecturers in their offices and during the completion of group assignments, as well as in other more informal domains such as on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and so on) and during certain social gatherings. Kramsch (2002, p. 98), House (2003), and Bam (2016) have similar findings that language use seems to be domain-oriented and that different languages serve different purposes, with English used mainly in formal domains for communication purposes, whereas the L1 is dominantly used in informal domains for identification purposes.

Although English is highly important, some students (those with the "right" L1S) also acknowledge the important role their L1S play in different aspects of their academic journey. One example was translating difficult terms from English into their L1 to better understand them. While English appears prominent in many domains on campus, local and foreign languages are mostly used in domains where interlocutors are friends, family members, or from the same language community. Furthermore, more than half of the students code-switch, especially between the MoI and their L1, to facilitate either their academic integration or social adjustment at the IUM. Shiweda (2013, p. 35) reported a similar finding, focusing predominantly on code-switching as a communicative practice in Namibian university classrooms. Amongst her findings was that different students engaged in different communicative practices during classroom interactions. One such practice occurred when students sometimes uttered words or phrases in Oshiwambo while speaking English to negotiate meanings in their academic work.

The second objective was to explore the functions of IUM students' linguistic repertoire on their social integration and academic success. The interview data showed that students' expected levels of academic success and social integration at university were related to the languages they entered the university with. The results revealed that most students initially believed that their language skills would support their academic success at IUM. After spending some time at the university, more students confirmed that their language abilities had indeed contributed positively to their academic performance. A similar pattern emerged regarding social integration. While many students initially expected their language repertoire to help them adapt socially to university life, more later reported that their language skills were instrumental in facilitating their social adjustment. Overall, the students' responses indicated that students with the "right" languages in their repertoires had high expectations that their linguistic repertoires would enable them to succeed academically and socially. Related findings were those of Pretorius and Small (2007), who explored the experiences of international students visiting Namibia; Kandiko and Mawer (2013), whose focus was on students' perceived stance on English-medium tertiary education; and Brinkworth et al. (2008), who focused on the expectations of both the first-year students and teachers concerning the language of education. Those students in the current study who thought that the languages in their linguistic repertoires would not and/or did not assist them in achieving academic success referred to their lack of sufficient proficiency in English. Similarly, students who thought their linguistic repertoires would not and/or did not assist them in adjusting socially to university life mostly referred to their lack of knowledge of locally spoken indigenous languages (especially Oshiwambo) or Afrikaans.

CONCLUSION

This study examined IUM students' perceptions and expectations of the functions of their linguistic

repertoires in achieving academic success and social integration. The study found that IUM students are multilingual and competent in an average of three languages. Students use different languages in different domains, and the preferred languages, in order of importance among the IUM students, are English, Oshiwambo, Afrikaans, and lastly foreign and other languages indigenous to Namibia. English is the prestigious language because it is the official language of the country, the sole MoI at the IUM, and the lingua franca on campus; it is credited with playing a critical role mainly in formal domains but also in informal settings. The results indicate that students who can speak Oshiwambo and Afrikaans in addition to English perceive themselves as better positioned to integrate easily at university than those who are equipped with only English and other minority languages. Moreover, IUM students have high expectations of their language repertoire in helping them to integrate socially and succeed academically. Of those interviewed, most strongly believed their languages enabled both social adjustment and academic success. These participants were mostly those who could express themselves well in more than two languages, of which one was English. However, some students (mostly foreign students) were either "in-between" or had reservations about the value of their language repertoires for achieving social adjustment and academic success at the IUM. They said they were regarded as "monolingual" in the Namibian context, because the languages they knew from their regions or countries were not spoken locally, except possibly English. In short, students are of the opinion that achievement (or lack thereof) of social integration and academic success at university was primarily determined by one's language repertoire. Due to the limited scope of the study in terms of research site (only one campus of one institution), year of study of participants (only newcomer first-years), and number of participants (only 44), the findings of this study cannot necessarily be generalised. Despite its limitations, the study makes a small contribution to our knowledge on how students can use their language repertoires as a valuable resource to ease their stay, socially and academically, at universities.

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