



# Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of the Relevance of African Languages in the Digital Space

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## Abstract

Digital learning is the future of education within the African context, and thus it is important to provide equitable access to educational content for all African language speaking students. By so doing, the quality of education and the relevance of African languages will be enhanced. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of teachers towards the relevance of African languages in the digital space.

The study adopted a mixed methods technique and chose a sample of 10 language teachers from four high schools for the online survey and semi-structured interviews. The online survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics, whilst the interview data was analysed using thematic analysis. The study's key findings showed that while the teachers were happy to see African languages being used on a digital platform, they advocated further for the empowering of African languages. However, there was a sentiment amongst majority of participating teachers that while African languages are important, they are however not relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that their integration onto digital platforms might be nice-to-have, but in the larger scope of things they will not prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The findings were explained against the theory of Colonial Mentality.

**Key words:** African languages, 21st-century status, digital learning.

## Introduction

The study aimed to investigate the perceptions of teachers towards the relevance of African languages in the digital space. The research was conducted in the context of a growing interest in using African languages in digital media and education. This study sheds light on the complexities surrounding the use of African languages in the digital age and highlights the need for further research and development in this area.

## Background

Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012) define colonialism as the physical dominance of a country, where power and control reside with a foreign power. Its goal was to exploit the resources

of the colonized country. McPhail (2014) identifies three key drivers of colonialism: control of land and resources, the market for products, and emotional and mental domination. While the first two drivers may eventually be addressed, the third driver's damage has long-term effects that are not easy to fix. Oliver and Oliver (2017) argue that the success of colonization did not solely depend on the exploitation of physical resources, but also on the exploitation and eventual domination of the human spirit, which involved the domination of culture and language.

Culture and language play significant roles in African society, with undeniable impacts on the economy and education, particularly the issues faced by African education (Chukwuere, 2017). It is widely believed that African languages lack the intellectual capacity to be used in technical and specialized fields of study, which is a result of the negative perception created by the process of colonization (Maseko et al., 2010).

The introduction of ICT was viewed as a crucial player in the education sector, providing students and teachers with access to information and resources that were previously inaccessible (Sithole & Yola, 2020). It promised improved educational standards and the narrowing of the digital divide between urban and rural areas. Sithole and Yola (2020) argue that access to ICT should be viewed as a fundamental human right. Nevertheless, the South African education system still faces inequality in the 21st century, which is a legacy of colonialism and apartheid-era policies, with language being at the center of these challenges (Muswede, 2017).

Poor resources continue to be a challenge for most schools in townships and rural areas despite the introduction of ICTs (International Centre for Educational Research and Innovation [ICERI], (Wijaya, 2019). Most learners in these areas are from disadvantaged backgrounds, which exacerbates the unfortunate state of education in these regions. However, digital and mobile technologies present an opportunity to improve the effectiveness and quality of education in South Africa (Sithole & Yola, 2020).

According to Bamgbose (2011) and Prah (2018) indigenous languages need to be included in the digital space, as it will provide users with new resources and improve the status and standing of these languages. Even though some African languages have a presence on the internet, there is minimal content in these languages (World Bank Group, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to translate digital resources and materials into African languages to enable their development and expansion (Wierenga & Carstens, 2021).

South Africa has over 10 official languages, which presents a hurdle in terms of language representation in official settings and online digital platforms (Wierenga & Carstens, 2021). Despite efforts to modernize and include African languages in the 21st-century mainstream, many first-language African speakers consider it counterproductive (Prah, 2018). Nonetheless, a government effort to empower all languages, including African languages, is necessary, though it may be expensive and labour-intensive (Yaman, 2015).

English dominates across all sectors, especially in technology, leading many non-English speakers to view it as the key to success. Yaman (2015) noted that without English, digital opportunities are limited, so learning the language is necessary to benefit from the internet. However, this situation stems from colonial mentality, where the ex-colonised society places high value on English as the dominant language (David & Okazaki, 2006). Decena (2014) and Kamwangamalu (2016) supported this, noting that colonised people often perceive their own language and culture as inferior and prefer English or other European languages. Despite the increasing importance of African languages in the digital age, there is a lack of understanding about how teachers perceive the relevance and importance of these languages in their classrooms and curriculum development. This research aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the relevance of African languages in the digital age and is guided by the research question is: *What are teachers' perceptions of the relevance and importance*

## **Review of Literature**

A literature review's goal is to identify, evaluate, and summarize existing research on a specific topic. This article's review is a critical summary and analysis of existing research pertinent to this topic, the review was guided by a set of eight themes or aspects that contribute to the study.

African languages continue to play an important role in the cultural, social, and economic development of the continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, many African languages face threats to their survival and ultimate use. One of the most significant challenges is the continued supremacy of colonial languages such as English and French as primary languages of education, business, and government.

### *African languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

Indigenous African languages refer to the diverse set of languages spoken by Africa's indigenous peoples. Němeček (2010), noted that African languages are experiencing a decline in its use and status. This condition was highlighted by Buzasi (2012) and Chukwuere (2017), who argue that the key reason behind the declining use and status of Indigenous African languages can be greatly attributed to the lasting effects of colonisation. Many academics and linguists, however, argue that the decline in use and status of African languages cannot be blamed solely on colonisation, but that the inattention of Africans themselves has also played a role (Gudhlanga & Makaudze, 2012).

Furthermore, (Kaleimamoowahinekapu Galla, 2018), pointed out that deficient or the lack of language policies and their inefficient implementation plays a role in the continued decline of the use and status of African languages. As such, African languages need to become globally relevant so that it can be used in specialist domains and subjects and not just for social and cultural gatherings (Kaschula & Maseko, 2014). This notion of specialist domain use of African languages was also proposed by Bamgbose (2011, p. 3), who stated that a common feature of a weakening language is when Indigenous speakers "no longer see any meaningful purpose of the language in the community". As such, it becomes imperative that African languages develop and possess the capacity and ability to be used effectively in specialist domains like law, science, education, medicine, business, and ICT, which will allow for the elevation of the status of African languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Dominance of the English Language*

Lieberman (2003) posits that many believe English is better suited for use in specialized fields due to its developed conventions. Ndebele (2014) and Rwantabagu (2011) argue that African leaders prioritized the unification of their diverse populations and adopted English or an ex-colonial language as the official language, sidelining indigenous African languages and identity. However, Prah (2007) notes that this resulted in the growth and dominance of English at the expense of African languages. African languages are further marginalized in employment and academia in post-1994 South Africa (Ndebele, 2014). This marginalization negatively affects the status of African languages and the self-esteem of African individuals (Gudhlanga and Makaudze, 2012; Ndimande-Hlongwa and Ndebele, 2017). Thus, African languages must be promoted and modernized to ensure equal access to opportunities and resources in fields such as law, science, business, and ICT (Phaahla, 2014; Zeleza, 2006).

### *Status of African Languages*

The impact of colonization on African language and culture has been enduring (Bamgbose, 2011). Only 10 out of 54 African countries recognize African languages as official, while 13

use Arabic and 49 ex-colonial languages (Ebatamehi, 2020). Despite some African countries attempting to promote indigenous languages after gaining independence, ex-colonial languages remain prominent (Wanjiru, 2020). In South Africa, English, a non-indigenous language, is given higher status and dominance over the nine indigenous African languages (Alexander, 1999). As a result, African languages are viewed as inferior, particularly by non-Africans, perpetuating their low status in the country (Ndimande-Hlongwa & Ndebele, 2017).

### **Modernization of African Languages**

The modernization of language is a term used to refer to the progressive development of a language to remain up to date and reflective of current global trends (Bodó, Fazakas, & Heltai, 2017). However, Nürnberger (2012), noted that achieving language modernity is much easier for dominant languages as compared to indigenous languages, as a result dominant languages such as English can produce/ create new and appropriate terms and concepts much easier and quicker. As a result, indigenous languages are forced either directly or indirectly to conform to and accept the information and solutions produced using a dominant language.

### **African languages in the digital age**

The benefits that technology has for the developing world cannot be underestimated, according to Etoundi et al., (2016), access to ICT must be prioritised so that these benefits are enjoyed by all. Attempts to address the issue of access has largely been successful in the last two decades, according to Venkatesh and Sykes (2013), there has been an increase in access to physical ICT resources and end-user skills training. However, Omojola (2009) and Osborn and Osborn (2010) noted that even with the issue of physical access and connectivity being addressed, the access that is granted in contexts like Africa is largely problematic in that large segments of Africa's population are not English speaking, yet most ICT platforms and resources are developed in languages alien to the African population.

The inclusion of African language in ICT platforms and resources will greatly address the new divide (Chukwuere, 2017), and , literature maintains that modernisation of African languages is not a new concept and that African languages have always undergone the process of modernisation, and as such, Indigenous African languages can intellectualise and modernise, become relevant, and be used in specialist fields and ICT in the 21st century (Prah, 2007 & Zeleza, 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Theory of Colonial Mentality.**

The theoretical framework adopted is the theory of Colonial Mentality. This theory was developed by Ashis Nandy, who argued that the effects of colonialism still influence the minds of former colonized people, and often they internalize the values, beliefs, and ways of thinking of their former colonizers, leading to a mentality of inferiority and powerlessness. Decena (2014, p. 2), further noted that colonial mentality is 'the perception of ethnic and cultural inferiority and a form of internalised racial oppression', held by individuals who were colonised. Decena (2014), further goes on to identify six key manifestations germane to the theory of Colonial Mentality. These manifestations include Language and Cultural inferiority, Cultural Shame, Within group discrimination, Physical traits, Unintellectual language, and Colonial Debt.

Within the context of this study, the aim of which was to identify perceptions teachers towards the relevance and importance of African languages in the digital age, the findings that manifested from this study were aligned and explained where applicable against the six manifestations of colonial mentality.

### **Research Design**

## **Method**

This study employed a mixed method research approach that utilized a case study design to understand the perceptions of teachers towards the relevance of African languages in digital age. A case study is a research method that involves in-depth analysis of a specific individual, group, in this case teachers. It is often used to explore complex social phenomena and to gain a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Shorten & Smith, 2017). In the context of this study, to secure a deep and thick understanding of the perceptions of African first language speaking teachers towards the relevance of African languages in the digital age, required a research method that would allow for the voice of the teacher to come through loud and clear in a natural environment, hence a case study approach was the best suited.

### **Participants:**

A total of 10 participants were selected using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were that teachers had to be teaching a language at high school and had to have access to and been using any digital device for at least six years. Furthermore, the final criteria, was that the teachers had to be at least bilingual (any African language and English). Each participant completed a consent form, and their anonymity was assured prior to the start of the study.

### **Data collection methods:**

Data collection instruments refer to the tools or methods used to gather information for research or evaluation (Glasow, 2005). These can include surveys, interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis. It is important that the research questions and population are considered when deciding on the appropriate data collection instrument (Creswell, 2015). A combination of methods may be used to triangulate data and increase the validity of the findings. To ensure the richness and depth of the data, the study used a combination of an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The online survey was structured, with pre-determined questions and some open-ended question, whilst the semi-structured interview instrument had a set of predetermined questions to guide the conversation, using the semi-structured interview allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the teachers' experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2015).

As the data collection process took place during the pandemic, school visits were restricted and as such the online survey was conducted using Google Forms and the semi-structured interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform, which lasted a maximum of 30 minutes.

### **Data analysis:**

The two methods of data collection used in this study guided the data analysis process. The online survey responses were analysed using simple descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics is a branch of statistics that deals with the description and summarization of data. It involves the use of quantitative methods to describe, explore, and understand the characteristics of a dataset (Conner & Johnson (2017) In the context of this study, the data that was collected using Google Form was then analysed and visualized with Google Form's built-in tools. The data collected from the interviews conducted through Zoom was transcribed and then analysed using Braun and Clarkes six steps of thematic analysis. A key advantage of using Braun and Clarkes model is its flexibility, and the ability to adapt the analysis process to suit the specific research question, data, and context. Furthermore, this method greatly assisted in drawing attention to an individual's biases and assumptions. After processing the data through this model, four themes emerged, these include African languages in a globalised world, African language as a language of teaching and learning, African languages in the digital space, and Benefits of ICT use in education.

### **Ethical considerations:**

In any research it is important to consider all ethical considerations and to take steps to ensure that the rights and welfare of research participants are protected throughout the

research process. In this study each participant completed an informed consent, which informed them about the nature and purpose of the research and provided them with information about the risks and benefits of participating, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, the teachers were informed of their right to confidentiality and privacy, and that measures would be taken to protect their identities and personal information using pseudonyms. Ethics clearance approval was received from the University of Johannesburg.

**Finding And Discussion**

**Findings**

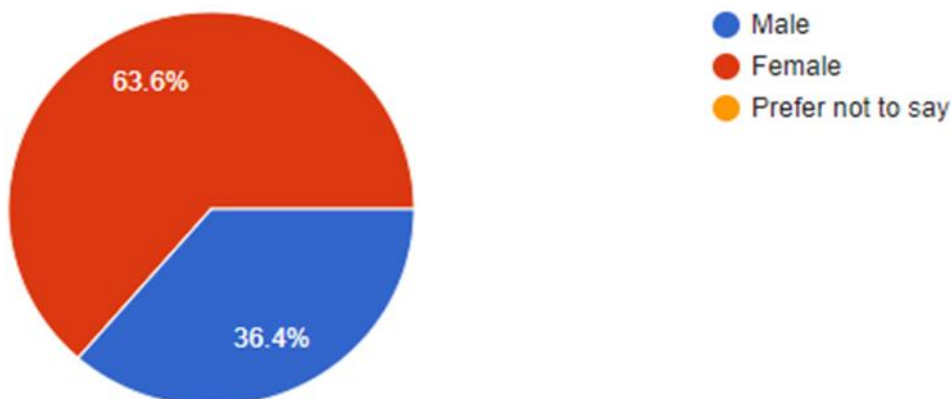
This article presents the results of a study that aimed to explore the perception of high school teachers in South Africa and how they perceived the relevance of African languages in a globalised world within the digital space. The findings will be presented in two sections, the first section will present the findings from the quantitative data and the second will present the findings from the qualitative data. The discussion section will be presented within the framework of the themes and will draw a synergy between the findings and the various sources of literature reviewed.

**Section A: Quantitative Phase**

The data derived for this section was generated from the online Google Form platform, the findings in this section will be presented in the form of descriptive statistics and supported by graphical representation. The quantitative phase is presented in two phases, the first phase looks at five demographic data aspects, whilst the second focuses on the broad question of teacher perceptions towards the relevance of African languages in the 21st century.

**1. DEMOGRAPHICS**

**Sex**



*Figure 1: Gender distribution of respondents*

In this study, 64% of the participants were female and 36% were male (Figure 1).

**Age**

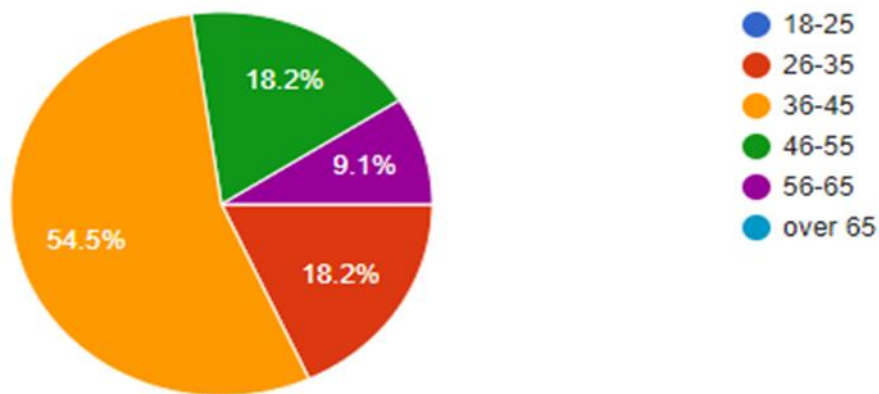


Figure 2: Respondents' ages in years

The age breakdown of the participants as shown in Figure 2 reflects that 55% participants were between the ages of 36 and 45 years, whilst the 9% of respondents were between 56 and 65 years.

**Teaching experience**

With regards to the teaching experience as shown in Figure 3, 46% of the participating teachers had between 5–10 years of teaching experience, while 27% had more than 20 years teaching experience, 18% had between 15–20 years of experience and 9% had less than five years teaching experience.

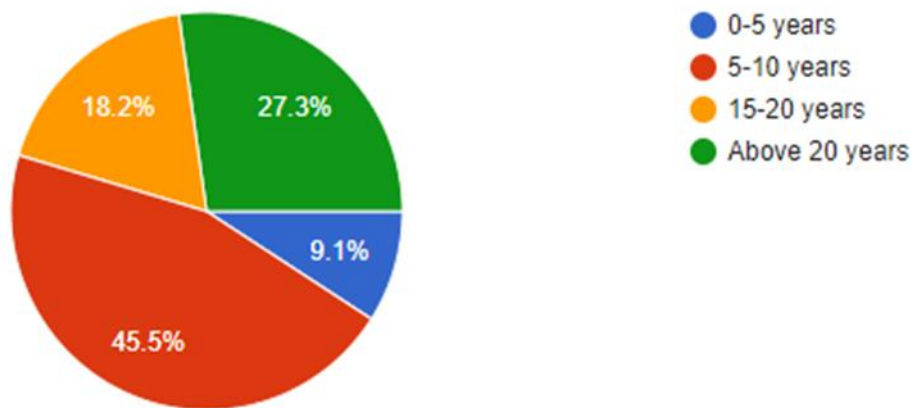


Figure.3: Respondents' teaching experience in years

**Home language**

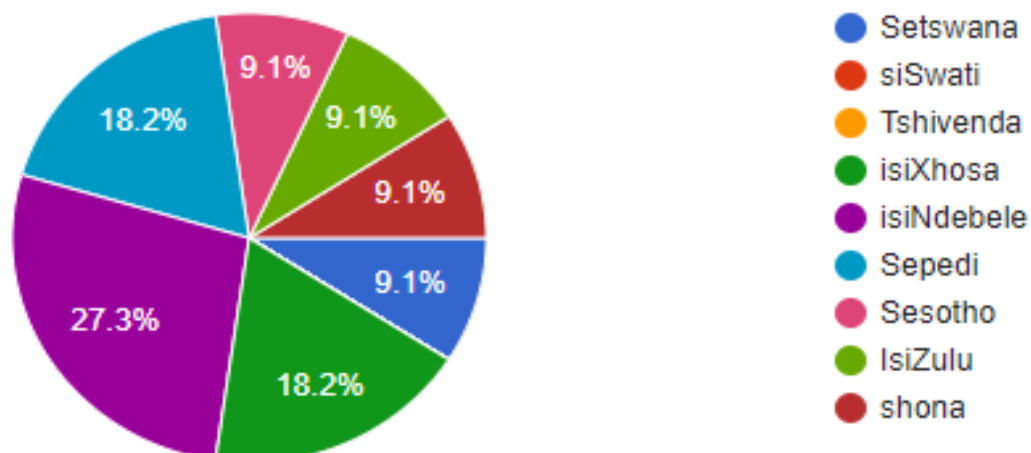


Figure 4: Respondents' home languages

There was a fair representation of African languages among the respondents, as presented in Figure 4. Most respondents spoke isiNdebele at 27%, with 18% of the teachers speaking isiZulu and Sepedi.

**Level of computer literacy**

From a scale of 0-4 (0=novice, 1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good and 4=expert), rate your level of computer literacy?

Responses

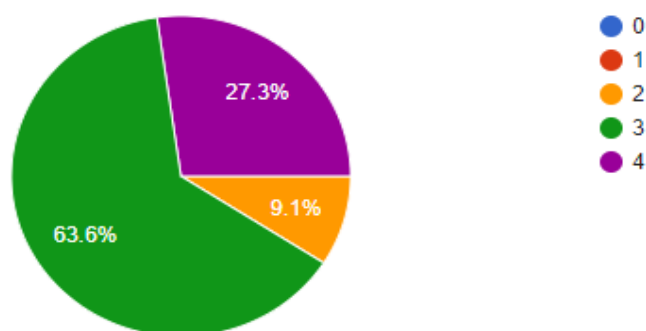


Figure 5: Respondents' level of computer literacy

Figure 5 reflects the level of computer literacy amongst the teachers, all the teachers indicated some level of computer knowledge, with 64% who rated themselves as good, while 27% said they are experts, and 9% believed their computer knowledge was fair.

**2. Teachers' perception of the relevance of African languages in the 21st century**

In this section, the participating teachers were presented with four statements that were related to the relevance of African languages in the 21st century. They were then provided with a three-level Likert response scale as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Teachers' perception of the relevance of African languages in the 21st century

	Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	African languages don't contribute to 21st-century education.	27%	9%	64%
2	English is an international language; therefore, students don't need to learn their African languages.	9%	9%	82%
3	Online learning platforms will modernise the learning of African languages.	82%	9%	9%
4	Teaching languages online will increase the status of languages worldwide in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century.	100%	0	0

Statement 1: This statement was phrased in the negative and attempted to understand how the participating teachers perceived the contribution of African languages to education the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In response, 64% of teachers disagreed with the statement and believed African languages do have a role to play in education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Statement 2: This statement essentially highlighted English as the dominant language and



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Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of the Relevance of African Languages in the Digital Space that learning an African language was not essential. In response, 82% of the teachers disagreed with the statement, while 9% agreed. Once again highlighting the fact that the teachers see the relevance of African languages.

*Statement 3:* The purpose behind this statement was to understand how teachers viewed the inclusion of African languages onto digital platforms, in response to this statement, 82% of the teachers agreed that by including African languages onto online platforms, would greatly assist in modernising African languages.

*Statement 4:* This statement was to determine how the teachers perceived the status of languages worldwide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and whether digital platforms had a role to play. The response to this statement was a 100% agreement, the teacher participants agreed that using a language in the digital space, would increase the status of the language.

## **Section B: Qualitative Phase**

This section of the findings will be presented against the four constructs that framed the interview instrument.

### **Construct A: Teacher's reasons for the inclusion of African languages on digital platforms**

According to Osborn and Osborn (2010)), the user of a language is the best advocate for the survival of a language. From the interview data, it was found that majority of the teachers supported the inclusion of African languages in the digital space, however their reasons differed. According to Teacher 1, "in the 21st century, African languages play an important role, a vital role because it is about self-identity", the concept of African identity and culture was also put forward by Teacher 5, who noted that by including African languages in the digital space, "accommodates, um, a diversity, different cultural diversity." Furthermore Teacher 6 also highlighted that including African languages would bring "some dignity to the African languages, some dignity to the African culture".

Teacher 2, came in more from a pedagogic perspective, and stated that African-speaking students should be given the opportunity to be exposed to digital platforms as, "it can make the learning easy, and the teaching will be easy". This view was further expanded on by Teacher 3, who justified the use of African languages in the 21st century, by comparing South Africa to China, and supported this argument by stating that "they use their language but are the best in the world", Teacher 4, on the other hand looked at the inclusion of African languages for the future and used the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and noted that, "COVID taught us a lot of lessons. you know, for instance, we should always be prepared when, something that stops us from having face to face learning." So, while the teachers all agreed on the inclusion of African languages in the digital space, we see that the reasons differed greatly.

### **Construct B: Teachers challenges using digital learning platforms.**

In the second construct, the focus was to look at the challenges teachers face when using digital learning platforms in the course of their work. The introduction and use of technology in South African schools was and is still influenced by elements of the digital divide, which range from lack of skills to lack of access to digital resources (Rwantabagu, 2011). The study findings showed that majority identified the skills gap of teachers and lack of ICT resources as the key challenges. According to Teacher 1, "we cannot implement new teaching strategies because they are not fully equipped with, uh, technical skills." The issue of the skills gap was also pointed out by Teacher 3, who identified lack of skills as the key challenge, "another thing is that teachers are lacking with the technical knowhow." Teacher 4 made an interesting argument and stated that "most of the teachers in the system at the present moment were trained in the absence of digital technology," hence implying the need for in-service training.

According to Seti et al. (2015), the digital divide is more than the issues of lack of skills and access, but ancillary factors such as culture and language can also widen the digital divide. The emergence of this argument was supported by additional findings such as Teacher 1, who highlighted the social context in which schools and students find themselves and pointed out the “socioeconomic barriers that hinder us from, uh, teaching fully online.” This argument was also elaborated on by Teacher 3, who emphasized the role of government to ensure equal access by stating that, “maybe the governments can improve, cellular coverages like the Wi-Fi.”, this was also highlighted by Teacher 6 who also alluded to “lack of data” and “network challenges” as some of the challenges faced when it comes to using digital learning platforms.

Expanding on other challenges, Teacher 1 was the only respondent who spoke to the issue of teachers’ pedagogical skills, and pointed out that, “there might be educators who are tech savvy. But do not necessarily know how to merge that tech services with their pedagogical knowledge and their content knowledge”. The issue of language extinction according to Osborn and Osborn, (2010) is a topical issue that has received much attention in mainstream research, however limited attention has been given to the presence of African or other indigenous languages in the digital space. A few teachers brought up the issue of language, especially the fact that they as African language speakers, must contend with digital resources in a foreign language (English). This argument is evidenced when Teacher 4 states that, “technology is, um, structured, you find that, um, most of, uh, the tools that are used in, learning are, are presented in English”, and goes on further to state that, “we want to teach African children in African languages”. This is further supported by Teacher 5, who claimed that “if the digital learning is done, using African language to make it easier for learners to learn some concepts”. However, Teacher 4 also reiterated that the big challenge is the availability of digital content in African languages, “there isn’t adequate content that is created in African languages for, um, for, for children to be able to learn.”

### **Construct C: Perceptions towards the use of English on digital platforms**

Various bodies of research have shown that English remains the dominant language in the digital space and that African languages is greatly underrepresented (Venkatesh and Sykes (2013)). This concern was noted by Teacher 1 who stated her concern with English being the only language used in the digital space, “I don’t appreciate the fact that, uh, we are only catering for one language”, and goes on further to justify the inclusion of African language in the digital space, “by changing the language to the person’s native language, you are simplifying the concepts or boiling them down to anything simpler.” The dominance of English was highlighted by a few of the teachers, the response from Teacher 1, further highlighted the extent of the problem, in that English is still dominant in the South African education system, because “most of our teachers learned their Pedagogy their way of teaching their content knowledge in English.”, implying that the more experienced teachers will sway towards using English. A further perception of English held by the teachers is that English greatly hinders effective teaching and learning, Teacher 4, noted, “learners who have English as a second or third or fourth, language, it already, um, creates a barrier between, the content that is presented and the students that are supposed to consume that content.” Furthermore Teacher 4, also highlighted that the internet is English language friendly, in that “because the internet seems to, um, only speak to English, speaking people, so English understanding people will find it easier to work in”. This point was also expanded on by Teacher 2, who stated that digital platforms should “be changed to, African languages because English only is not benefiting them”. This view was also reiterated by Teacher 4, who felt that English domination of the digital space is a “disadvantage for learners who do not really understand, the language that the internet is presented in.”

However, the findings also showed a differing set of perceptions with regards to the use of English on digital platforms. According to Teacher 5, English is and “international language” and “we are used to using the English, as a medium of instruction”. Teacher 6 however looked at the use of English on the digital space as a convenient and common language, in that, “the world is a global village now where people interact with people of different nationalities, and maybe English becomes a common language that people can communicate.” The positives of using English were further supported by Teachers 4 and 6, who drew attention to the argument that using English brings “a certain degree of, of comfort” to the teaching, Teacher 6 substantiates this by stating that, “a teacher is teaching biology. Okay. The teacher can comfortably talk in English.” Finally, Teacher 4 further claimed that “no language can be used on digital platforms”, hence the belief that African languages lack the intellectual or technical capacity that English has.

#### **Section D: Perception of teachers towards the relevance of African languages in the 21st century**

According to Lusekelo (2018), the world has become more competitive, and as such South Africans need to be prepared to compete on the global stage, and with English being the language of international communication, it would stand to reason that many South Africans view English as being relevant for communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 21st century skill set as alluded to in many educational policies and frameworks, include communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, of which language forms the foundation. According to Teacher 1, if we focus on communication as an example and collaboration, cause to collaborate, you must be able to communicate”, Furthermore Teacher 1 noted that, “in the 21st century, African languages play an important role, a vital role, because it is about self-identifying.” However, developing and promoting the self-identity is a problem, what the findings show is that some parents according to Teacher 2, “want their, their children to understand English more than their African languages.”, as a result the African student starts to lose their identity, which ultimately impacts the relevance of African languages.

According to Teacher 2, the inclusion of African languages in education is vital, as it would be of benefit to African students since, “they won't need the expensive education while they can get the same education that they can get in their locations and speak their languages”. Furthermore, there is a widely held notion that African languages lack the intellectual capacity to be used in specialist subjects, this was highlighted by Teacher 3, who explained that students may not perform well, “not because they're not intelligent, but because it's not explained in their mother tongue that they can understand”, added on Teacher 3 also noted that, “students shy away from sciences, coz its difficult, yet they'll be able to do well in those subjects. If they're taught in there, in African languages.”

The relevance of African languages depends on its use, Teacher 4, provides a great argument, when she states that if, “the Bible for instance, that it has been. translated into so many languages,” and everyone reads, so “there's no reason why learning content cannot be translated into so many languages and digital tools.”

However, the findings also highlighted differing views with regards to the relevance of African languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Teacher 5 believed African languages have no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Teacher 5: “I feel like African languages are not supposed to be done in the 21st century.”. The responses from Teacher 5, could have been also construed as very negative, to the extent where she stated categorically, “as much as we are Africans, we need to do away with our African language”. Teacher 6, on the other hand was not so vociferous, but also felt that the relevance of African languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be problematic, as “the only problem that may come with it, as I mentioned is that will be confined to a certain geographical area, since there are so many different languages in the different parts of SA.” Teacher 6 highlighted the problem of commonality and unity, aspects

that were used by colonists and the ruling elite to maintain a colonial language as the official language.

So, while this study generated some interesting findings, with teachers presenting varying views, a very poignant moment was a closing remark from Teacher 6, who essentially tied this argument up into an impactful statement, “we cannot entirely divorce our African language because our art, our life. Our creativity. The very rhythm of life will make sense when it is in our, in our African language,”

### **Discussion**

Numerous technological advancements have occurred in the digital age, revolutionizing the way we communicate, access and engage with information. With the rapid growth of the internet, the role of language in our online interactions has grown in importance. African languages, in particular, play an important role in ensuring that African communities' voices are heard in the digital space. The research question that based this article was: *What are teachers' perceptions of the relevance and importance of African languages in the digital age?* The focus was on the importance of African language preservation and promotion in the digital era, as well as their role in ensuring cultural diversity and linguistic inclusivity in the online world.

### **The inclusion of African languages on digital platforms**

According to Osborn and Osborn (2010), issues around culture and especially language has greatly influenced the spread of technology. The findings that emerged from this study present varying reasons why teachers would like to see the inclusion of African languages in the digital space. A point that was repeatedly noted was the issue of the African identity, teachers stated that by including African languages in the digital space, the African person would gain a sense of pride and dignity with regards the African language and culture. This view was aligned to Němeček (2010), who noted that African languages are experiencing a decline in its use and status. Furthermore the findings also showed that teachers identified that using technology would make teaching and learning easier, and as such including African languages into the digital space will assist African learners.

### **Challenges in using digital learning platforms.**

As technology continues to advance, a greater number of teachers are engaging with ICT to enhance their teaching methods. However, the adoption and use of ICT in the classroom is also hampered by challenges. What the findings from this study highlighted, was that many teachers still viewed physical access and skills as key central challenges to technology acceptance. However, Seti et al. (2015), argued that the digital divide is not predicated solely by lack of access or skills, but rather through intrinsic factors such as language and culture.

### **English use on digital platforms**

English is the default language on most digital platforms and software, but its dominance is adversely affecting education in South Africa, as noted by Ndimande-Hlongwa and Ndebele (2017) and Yu and Dumisa (2015). The study found that English serves as a gatekeeper to learning and technology, as African languages are being side-lined in key sectors of the economy and academia (Ndebele, 2014). Speaking English is seen as a step towards economic prosperity and a higher social status (Gudhlanga and Makaudze, 2012; Phaahla, 2010).

While lack of physical access was once attributed to the digital divide, the study found that a small group of teachers believed that technology ideally benefits those who speak English fluently, and that digital platforms and software should accommodate the language of the

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of the Relevance of African Languages in the Digital Space target recipients (Phaahla, 2014; Khan, 2014; Bodó, Fazakas, and Heltai, 2017). Some teachers defended the use of English based on the concept of language commonality, viewing it as a unifying force for the country (Alexander, 1999; Ndebele, 2014; Rwantabagu, 2011). However, the study also found that some teachers perceive English as the only intellectual language and that specialist fields like ICT can only be successful using English, a view supported by Lieberman (2003) and allowing for the sustained growth, adoption, and dominance of English in postcolonial Africa (Léglise and Migge, 2007).

### **Relevance of African languages in the 21st century**

Kaschula and Maseko (2014), argued that the status of African languages must be raised for it to be modernised so as to be on par with technological advancements, as it was clearly mentioned by a teacher, upskilling is not dependent on English proficiency. Nürnberger (2012), alluded to cultural lag, and cautioned against African language lagging behind advances in technology. This cultural lag is because of the belief that African languages are not intellectual, this view was evident in the findings, where many teachers felt that African languages lack the technical terms and content. This view was noted in the early work of Finlayson and Madiba, (2002), who argued that the use of the phrase intellectualization of African languages can be controversial, as it could imply that African languages lack the required intelligence of use.

Another comment that was apparent was teachers views that using multiple African languages in South Africa will perpetuate disunity in the country, while English will unite the various groupings in South Africa. This argument is what Decena (2014), referred to when unpacking the concept of colonial mentality as a feeling of ethnic and cultural inferiority, and that using African languages will create disunity. Furthermore, the findings also showed that teachers believed fluency in English would open doors, whilst African languages would hinder a student's progress in the 21st century. These sentiments are all evidence of the thinking that permeates in the theory of colonial mentality.

The modernization of African languages can provide learners with confidence and reassurance that their language and culture is respected and can stand on the global stage. The findings clearly show that while the teachers were happy to see the use of African languages in the digital space, they were however highly sceptical of its relevance in the digital space and in in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The multitude of reasons and perceptions apparent in the data can be explained through the Theory of Colonial Mentality.

### **Recommendations For Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations for future research that can build on the current research's findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions towards the relevance of African languages in the digital space.

- Explore both teacher and student perceptions of the relevance of African languages in the digital space.
- Examine the availability and quality of digital tools and resources in African languages.
- Investigate policy and government initiatives to promote the use of African languages in the digital space.
- Explore the potential of emerging technologies to promote language diversity and inclusion.

These recommendations can lead to a deeper understanding of the role of African languages in the digital space and promote diversity and inclusion in language representation.

Overall, these recommendations for future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relevance of African languages in the digital space and provide important insights into how digital tools and resources can be leveraged to promote language diversity and inclusion.

### **Contribution of The Study**

The topic of exploring teachers' perceptions of the relevance of African languages in the digital space is a highly relevant in the digital age. With the rapid growth of technology, African languages should also be accommodated in the digital space and understanding the perceptions of teachers can provide valuable insight into how this trend can be leveraged to further the development of African languages.

The findings from this study would provide important information on how African languages can be used in the digital space and how teachers perceive their relevance, furthermore the findings could inform policy makers on strategies to encourage the use of African languages in digital contexts, while also providing teachers with a better understanding of how they can support the use of African languages in the digital space. Moreover, the research could identify areas where African languages are under-utilized in the digital space and what needs to be done to increase their presence. Furthermore, the research could also provide insights into how African languages can be used to create educational materials and resources in the digital space.

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