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Universal Design for Learning and the Integration of African Languages: Pathways to Inclusivity in Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a flexible pedagogical framework providing equal opportunities for diverse students to succeed. This paper presents a reflective case study on the integration of UDL principles to promote inclusive education through the use of African languages within first-year English support classes at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Drawing on reflective practice and student observations, it highlights the persistent marginalisation of African languages in formal education and the transformative potential of UDL to address these challenges. Findings indicate that UDL strategies enhance student engagement, cultural inclusivity, and linguistic accessibility. The paper emphasises the importance of institutional support, policy alignment, and professional training to ensure sustainability. Offering practical insights, it is aimed at educators and policymakers committed to advancing multilingual, inclusive education in South Africa.

Keywords: African languages, Inclusive education, Linguistic diversity, Distance learning.

Introduction

Higher education in South Africa faces a persistent challenge. Despite the country's rich linguistic diversity and constitutional recognition of twelve official languages, English remains the dominant language of instruction. This dominance creates significant barriers for students whose first languages are African languages (Bwowe, 2024; Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). Such barriers restrict students' ability to engage with academic content fully and undermine their constitutional right to education in a language they understand deeply. English hegemony further undermines the use of indigenous languages, cultural identity, and educational equity (Khoza-Shangase & Mophosho, 2018). Consequently, these challenges contribute to lower academic performance, especially among low-performing first-year students who require additional language support. The continued marginalisation of African languages in teaching and learning environments perpetuates educational inequities and exclusion. Addressing this issue is critical for achieving educational equity and fostering inclusive pedagogies that reflect South Africa's multilingual realities (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020; Bwowe, 2024).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a flexible, neuroscience-informed framework that acknowledges learner diversity and promotes inclusive educational practices from the beginning of the learning process rather than focusing on remediation after barriers arise. Although often associated with supporting students with disabilities, UDL's principles of multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression provide a novel approach for integrating African languages into English language support programmes. This approach challenges traditional monolingual instruction and advocates for flexible, multimodal teaching strategies that foreground linguistic inclusivity. Theoretically, UDL expands understandings of language learning by positioning linguistic diversity as an asset that enhances cognitive engagement and academic success (Doran, 2015; Boateng, Kalonde & Duedu, 2025). It offers new pathways to equity in multilingual higher education contexts that have historically privileged English.

Current knowledge recognises the global growth of UDL's application in inclusive education, yet research specifically addressing its use to integrate African languages in South African university settings remains limited. Practical challenges persist, including weak policy enforcement, insufficient teacher training, limited multilingual resources and digital divides that affect student access. Despite progressive legislation, such as the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020), which advocates for mother tongue instruction, implementation in higher education remains limited. This article presents an empirical reflection on the application of UDL principles to integrate African languages into English support classes for first-year students at the University of South Africa. The findings of this study have practical implications for policy and practice, demonstrating how linguistically inclusive pedagogies can enhance student motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes. Furthermore, the findings highlight the necessity for institutional commitment to educator professional development, resource allocation and technology infrastructure to fully realise UDL's potential in transforming multilingual education (SADTU, 2023).

Background

South Africa has a rich linguistic landscape, with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) recognising 11 official languages. As of 2024, sign language was added as the twelfth official language. However, despite the formal recognition of all twelve South African languages, English remains the dominant language in higher education. This ongoing dominance creates barriers for students whose first language is an African language (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020; SADTU, 2023). The preference given to English over African languages not only undermines students' constitutional right to education in their language of choice but also limits their ability to engage thoroughly with the content. Research has shown that learning in one's first language enhances engagement and understanding, contributing to academic success (Gobana, 2024; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). Nevertheless, African languages remain marginalised in higher education settings, which limits students' ability to participate in the learning process with a meaningful understanding. UDL offers a promising approach to integrating African languages into teaching practices, meeting the diverse linguistic needs of students in multilingual education settings in South Africa (CAST, 2020).

Research demonstrates the capacity of UDL as both a theoretical framework and a practical approach to transform inclusive education globally. UDL is grounded in neuroscience and provides an understanding of students' brain function. UDL is based on three core principles of multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2020; Rose & Gordon, 2014). This approach encourages designing lessons that are accessible to all students from the onset, irrespective of their learning styles, differing from traditional teaching methods, which remediate after students encounter barriers. Scholars argue for the adoption of UDL in educational policies, particularly inclusive education policy, to better align policy goals with classroom realities and to improve communication among teachers, students and policy makers (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020). Although much UDL research has focused on learning disabilities, its principles apply to language support contexts, offering multimodal content delivery and various avenues for students to demonstrate comprehension. UDL strategies such as presenting content in multiple formats have been shown to increase participation and understanding, particularly in multilingual education settings (Boateng, 2025; Moleko & Mosimege, 2021). Moreover, the policy adoption of the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020) also emphasises the importance of teaching in students' mother tongues alongside other languages, highlighting the urgent need for linguistically inclusive education (Walizadha, 2025; RSA, 2024).

Despite advances such as the implementation of the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020), teachers and students in linguistically diverse educational environments in

South Africa continue to face numerous challenges. Research points to gaps which include but are not limited to weak policy enforcement, inadequate teacher training on integrating African languages in teaching practices, training in UDL application, and a lack of teaching resources that effectively incorporate African languages (Ferreira-Meyers & Horne, 2017; SADTU, 2023). While the benefits of UDL have been documented by many scholars, there is a paucity of studies that demonstrate how UDL can be used to integrate African languages into university first-year English classes. This study addresses this gap by focusing on a teacher's experience of applying UDL principles to include African languages during English support classes.

This study offers an empirical understanding of how teaching that acknowledges linguistic diversity and uses UDL can improve student engagement and promote inclusion in education by examining the author's reflective experience of applying UDL to integrate African languages in a series of lessons over a semester. The research findings reveal both challenges and positive outcomes of using UDL to incorporate African languages into teaching English. The notable challenges include resource constraints and teacher training. The findings also show that UDL encourages flexible lesson delivery, responsive teaching, and increased student involvement across diverse language backgrounds. The study provides practical guidance to educators and policymakers on how to advance inclusive education and make inclusion a reality that better serves South Africa's diverse students, moving the country towards educational equity.

Theoretical framework

The current study draws on the UDL framework. UDL is a pedagogical framework grounded in cognitive neuroscience and educational theory, positing that learning should be accessible and inclusive for all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities (CAST, 2020). UDL is underpinned by three interconnected principles: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement and multiple means of expression. The three principles of UDL are designed to reduce educational barriers by providing flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learners from the beginning rather than through targeted remediation (Rose & Gordon, 2014).

The multiple means of representation principle acknowledges that students perceive and comprehend information in different ways. Thus, it recommends presenting content through various formats such as visual, auditory, and linguistic modalities to enhance accessibility and comprehension (CAST, 2020). By offering diverse ways to represent content, educators can better meet the cognitive needs of students, including those learning in multilingual contexts (Moleko & Mosimege, 2021). The multiple means of engagement principle posits that motivation and engagement differ among learners. Therefore, this principal advocates for different approaches to stimulate interest and encourage participation in learning. It includes promoting relevant content and collaboration to create learning experiences that are meaningful for individual students (Rose & Gordon, 2014). In a comprehensive open distance e-learning (CODeL) context, different engagement methods help mitigate feelings of isolation and support learner autonomy (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). The third principle of UDL, multiple means of expression, supports diverse ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. It encourages flexibility in communication to accommodate students' preferences and strengths (CAST, 2020). By providing multiple possibilities for expression, such inclusive practices recognise different linguistic and cultural identities of students in CODeL environments (Doran, 2015).

The UDL framework aligns closely with multilingual education policies and research that emphasises linguistic diversity in South Africa's higher education system (UNISA, 2025a). UDL provides a workable approach to inclusive pedagogy that values linguistic diversity (Moleko & Mosimege, 2021; SADTU, 2023). In educational environments such as CODeL institutions, UDL enable educators to incorporate African languages through multilingual glossaries, code-switching opportunities, and culturally relevant examples in assessments. Such practices

are embodied in the principles of representation and engagement.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge on UDL by applying its principles in a CODeL setting to foster linguistic inclusivity, particularly through integrating African languages in English support classes. Through reflective practice, it demonstrates how UDL principles can guide flexible and accessible teaching strategies that can be tailored to suit the linguistic needs and socio-economic realities of diverse students (Bwowe, 2024). It also highlights challenges such as resource constraints and digital divides, calling for institutional investment in professional development and multilingual resources (SADTU, 2023).

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative reflective practice methodology to explore the integration of UDL principles in English support classes at a South African university. Reflective practice is suitable for this study, as it facilitates an in-depth examination of teaching experiences, pedagogical decisions, and their impact on student engagement and inclusivity (Schon, 1983; Malicay, 2023). This method is particularly suitable in educational research where context-dependent phenomena require rich, interpretive insights rather than purely quantitative measurements (Finlay, 2008). Through self-reflection, the author analysed the iterative process of adapting teaching materials to incorporate African languages, illuminating practical strategies and challenges encountered.

Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of one academic semester during a first-year English proficiency module at the University of South Africa. This module is designed to develop foundational skills in English language comprehension, critical reading, and academic writing, tailored for distance-learning students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. The primary sources of data included the author's reflective journals, which documented weekly teaching experiences, decisions made to adapt lesson content for multilingual access, and contemplations based on direct observations during classes. These journals documented the iterative process of adapting teaching materials and strategies in response to students' needs and engagement patterns. Additionally, observational notes were taken during online sessions to record student participation rates, motivation and interaction and engagement levels. This triangulation of data sources provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the UDL intervention influenced learning dynamics and accessibility in the module.

Data Analysis

Reflective journals and observational notes were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic approach widely recognised in educational research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a systematic process: it began with repeated readings of the data to develop familiarity, followed by the generation of initial codes that captured the significant features of the content. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to form preliminary themes. Subsequent stages involved reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they coherently represented the data, culminating in clear definitions and naming of each theme for reporting purposes (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach enabled the identification of patterns related to the effectiveness of UDL principles in promoting linguistic inclusivity, enhancing student engagement, and exposing pedagogical challenges. Triangulation of the three data sources enhanced the credibility of findings by confirming emerging themes across various perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Context

The University of South Africa (UNISA) prioritises inclusivity to address the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of its students (UNISA, 2025a). In July of 2025, UNISA introduced the Institutional Multilingual Language Policy to promote the use of all 12 official South African languages, including South African Sign Language. The goal of the Institutional Multilingual Language Policy is to enhance accessibility and honour cultural heritage (UNISA, 2025b). This policy supports the use of African

languages in learner support academic programmes, fostering functional multilingualism and addressing the historical marginalisation of indigenous languages. The College of Human Sciences, through its commitment to inclusive education, promotes teaching practices that value linguistic diversity and promote equity. Such practices help foster a supportive learning environment for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (UNISA, 2024). This approach aims to reduce barriers to participation, improve student engagement, and enhance academic outcomes, particularly for first-year English second-language students in a distance learning context (Bwowe, 2024).

As an English lecturer at UNISA, the author explored UDL through a professional development workshop inspired by prior research at the University of the Western Cape on multilingual pedagogies. The workshop focused on adapting teaching strategies to support linguistic diversity. The UDL workshop involved a small group discussion and activity on applying UDL to an existing course assignment or module. Through this course, the author critically engaged with UDL principles, discussed strategies for addressing linguistic barriers in classrooms, in this case CODeL environments and identified areas in which traditional teaching methods cannot accommodate linguistically diverse students, and how UDL might help to bridge learning for a larger number of students in linguistically diverse settings.

The reflection follows a reflective practice-based approach where the author aimed to develop a deeper understanding of their own practice and improve their professional skills (Adams, 2024). The reflection on UDL application spanned a semester, which is equivalent to a six-month academic cycle. The author draws on their teaching experience and observes student interactions in virtual discussion forums conducted via Microsoft Teams, as well as engagement with online learning materials, as this was part of a research project in the College of Human Sciences titled "Student Engagement: Care-based interaction in ODL pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic". Ethical clearance was acquired (Ref: Rec-240816-052). The UDL strategies were applied in a first-year module (English Proficiency for University studies), with approximately 850 students enrolled in the College of Human Sciences.

UDL implementation involved adapting teaching materials to include culturally relevant material, methods, and opportunities to engage with lecturers in students' first languages where practically possible, to accommodate diverse linguistic needs and learning preferences in a CODeL setting. Only two principles of UDL were explored: multiple means of representation and engagement. Multiple means of representation involve providing information to students in various formats. In contrast, multiple means of engagement relate to providing different ways and opportunities for students to become interested in and stay motivated throughout their learning. For example, the author incorporated a multilingual question-and-answer session in a virtual class, where explanations of the content were first presented in English and subsequently explained in isiZulu and Sesotho. This enabled students to engage with content in their mother tongues alongside English. These forums fostered collaborative learning by allowing students to share culturally relevant examples, enhancing comprehension and engagement.

Results

The results section presents key reflections collected throughout the semester, drawn from the author's reflective journal and observations of student engagement in virtual classes and with learning content. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the practical impact of UDL principles within the first-year English proficiency module. The reflections highlight both the positive effects of applying UDL strategies and the challenges encountered in the process. By organising the findings thematically, this section aims to clearly articulate the lessons that emerged from the intervention, grounding them in the contextual realities of distance higher education. The reflections on UDL implementation are organised into four key areas:

1. Influence on teaching practices in a distance learning context: Multiple Means of Representation

2. Student participation in virtual classes and motivation: Multiple Means of Engagement
3. Promoting linguistic inclusion: Multiple Means of Representation
4. Opportunities and challenges of integrating African languages in CODeL settings: Multiple Means of Action and Expression

Key Reflections

Influence on teaching practices in a distance learning context: Multiple Means of Representation

Implementing UDL principles prompted a critical reassessment of teaching strategies, assessment methods, and resource design within the English Proficiency for University Studies module. Initially, adapting materials for a multilingual, distance learning environment appeared resource-intensive, especially given CODeL's constraints, such as limited synchronous sessions due to limited data provisions for students (UNISA, 2025a). However, UDL's emphasis on flexibility reshaped this approach. The author introduced multilingual question-and-answer sessions in virtual classes, presenting explanations in isiZulu and Sesotho alongside English. This enabled students to engage with content in their mother tongues, accommodating linguistic and technological diversity. Module feedback showed that most students viewed these adaptations as supportive of their learning. UDL shifted the author's pedagogical philosophy towards prioritising accessibility and adaptability. This is critical in CODeL contexts where connectivity and socio-economic challenges prevail (Bwowe, 2024). This process has strengthened the author's commitment to equitable learning aligned with UNISA's inclusivity goals.

Student participation in virtual classes and motivation: Multiple Means of Engagement

The implementation of UDL aimed to enhance student engagement through varied strategies. Interactive discussion forums were introduced on *myUnisa* to foster a sense of community and provide varied opportunities for involvement. While students were encouraged to use their home languages in virtual classes, all observed contributions in the discussion forums were predominantly made in English. Participation was incentivised through marks, with students required to submit screenshots as evidence of their contributions. While this approach supported diverse linguistic expression, inconsistent internet access affected some students' ability to participate fully. These limitations underscore the continued need for offline and flexible learning resources within CODeL settings (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Promoting linguistic inclusion: Multiple Means of Representation

UDL's emphasis on inclusivity closely aligns with UNISA's multilingual language policy. This alignment provides a supportive framework for integrating African languages into English instruction. The author provided a multilingual word list to students, creating a learning environment that actively values and affirms students' linguistic and cultural identities. The multilingual word list included academic English terms alongside their equivalent expressions in students' home languages. This fostered a stronger sense of belonging and cultural respect. Verbal feedback from students indicated that they felt the lecturer genuinely cared about their success and was committed to doing everything possible to ensure they understood the material. This acknowledgement enhanced their engagement and motivation in the course.

This approach challenges the historical marginalisation of African languages in formal education. It supports UNISA's strategic goal of Africanising the curriculum (UNISA, 2025b). UDL's multiple means of representation encourage the presentation of content in varied formats to accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds and learning preferences (Moleko & Mosimege, 2021). The use of alternative explanations, translations, and culturally relevant examples enabled students to navigate complex academic content with greater confidence. Diverse representations also support cognitive accessibility by addressing differences in how students perceive and process information. Providing multiple modalities to comprehend and engage with material makes the learning environment more

inclusive for learners with different linguistic and cultural experiences. Employing multiple means of representation within the UDL framework advances equitable learning opportunities. It also reinforces South Africa's commitment to multilingual education.

Opportunities and challenges of integrating African languages in CODeL settings: Multiple Means of Action and Expression

Integrating African languages within CODeL posed both opportunities and challenges. UDL enabled the development of flexible, multilingual resources that enhanced student comprehension and engagement. This supports UNISA's commitment to functional multilingualism (UNISA, 2025a). For example, multilingual Q&A sessions in isiZulu and Sesotho empowered students, especially those with limited English proficiency from rural areas. However, challenges included insufficient lecturer training in multilingual pedagogy and a scarcity of digital resources for less-resourced languages, such as Tshivenda and Xitsonga. Connectivity issues further restricted access to multimedia content, necessitating the use of alternative formats, such as downloadable PDFs. These findings point to the need for ongoing professional development and institutional support to fully realise UDL's potential in CODeL settings (SADTU, 2023).

The UDL principles resonate with inclusive pedagogy by removing cognitive barriers and enabling multiple paths to learning and expression (CAST, 2020). Integrating African languages within this framework advances educational equity. It acknowledges cultural identities and strengthens South Africa's multilingual education policies (UNISA, 2025b). This theoretical, policy, and practical alignment enhances the study's contribution to the scholarship of inclusive education.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how the integration of UDL principles into English support classes could foster linguistic inclusivity for first-year students in a Collaborative Open Distance e-Learning (CODeL) context at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Aligning with existing literature, the findings reaffirm that UDL provides a flexible pedagogical framework that enhances accessibility and engagement, particularly in linguistically diverse educational settings (CAST, 2020; Doran, 2015; Moleko & Mosimege, 2021). Prior studies have identified English's dominance in South African higher education as a barrier that marginalises African language speakers, reducing their academic participation and success (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020; Bwowe, 2024). Consistent with this, the study found that employing UDL's principles of multiple means of representation and engagement enabled more equitable access to learning by accommodating students' mother tongues alongside English, thereby addressing the linguistic challenges prevalent in CODeL environments.

This study contributes a novel insight by demonstrating the practical application of UDL to actively integrate African languages, such as isiZulu and Sesotho, in distance learning English support classes. While UDL's theoretical potential for inclusive education is well documented, its use to explicitly incorporate African languages in higher education remains under-explored (Priyadharsini & Mary, 2024; SADTU, 2023). The detailed reflective practice approach revealed that multilingual strategies, such as bilingual explanations and encouraging code-switching in discussion forums, not only enhanced comprehension but also fostered a sense of cultural belonging and student motivation. This nuance extends prior research by illustrating how UDL can operationalise multilingual inclusivity in digital learning contexts marked by diverse socio-economic realities (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Furthermore, the study eliminates alternative explanations attributing improved engagement solely to increased content access by highlighting students' expressed appreciation for linguistic validation, indicating that cultural identity affirmation is integral to learning efficacy (Doran, 2015). Thus, the findings validate UDL as both a pedagogical framework and a mindset shift that prioritises equity and empathy in linguistically heterogeneous cohorts.

This study's findings carry several important implications for ongoing research and educational practice. From a theoretical

perspective, the reflection calls for expanding UDL research to systematically investigate multilingual applications beyond disability-focused contexts, especially in postcolonial, multilingual higher education settings (CAST, 2020; Moleko & Mosimege, 2021). Future research should utilise robust evaluative frameworks, such as CAST's UDL Guidelines, to quantify the impact of multilingual UDL interventions on academic performance and retention (CAST, 2020). Practically, the insights underscore the necessity for institutional policy alignment and long-term investment in multilingual resource development and lecturer training, which are currently inadequate in many South African CODeL programs (SADTU, 2023; UNISA, 2025a). Decision-makers must recognise that fostering linguistic inclusivity through UDL is a complex, resource-intensive endeavour requiring integrated infrastructure solutions that address digital divides and connectivity challenges, especially in rural areas (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Moreover, embedding UDL principles institution-wide could transform teaching philosophies towards more student-centred, culturally responsive approaches that honour South Africa's constitutional multilingualism and educational equity mandates (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020; UNISA, 2025b).

Reflecting on limitations, this study's reliance on a single lecturer's reflective practice and anecdotal student feedback constrains the generalizability of the findings. While the in-depth reflection provides valuable practice-based insights, future studies could enrich understanding by including multiple lecturers' experiences and systematically capturing diverse student voices through interviews or surveys. Additionally, the study was limited in its exploration of only two of the three core UDL principles, focusing mainly on representation and engagement. The principle of multiple means of expression warrants further investigation in CODeL multilingual contexts to comprehensively assess UDL's inclusive potential (CAST, 2020; Rose & Gordon, 2014). Furthermore, a deeper inquiry into the practical challenges of adapting resources for less-resourced African languages such as Tshivenda and Xitsonga could illuminate scalable strategies to address equity concerns in CODeL settings (SADTU, 2023). By acknowledging these limitations, the study opens avenues for expanded research that can more robustly establish the efficacy of multilingual UDL applications and their institutional sustainability.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that integrating UDL into English support classes within a distance learning context can significantly enhance linguistic inclusivity. By adapting teaching practices to incorporate multiple languages, students' engagement and sense of cultural belonging improve, which challenges the traditional one-size-fits-all approach to language instruction. The findings highlight how flexible, student-centred pedagogies that acknowledge linguistic diversity can create more equitable and accessible learning environments. Furthermore, this study offers practical insights into the complexities of applying inclusive frameworks, such as UDL, in real-world digital educational settings. It emphasises the importance of institutional commitment to professional development, the development of multilingual resources, and the provision of technological support to bridge digital divides. This multifaceted approach not only benefits students by addressing language barriers but also promotes broader educational equity aligned with constitutional and policy goals.

However, the author's subjective reflections represent a limitation, as they are influenced by personal perspectives and experiences, which may introduce bias and affect the objectivity of the findings. Looking ahead, future research should employ structured tools, such as CAST's UDL Guidelines (CAST, 2020), and incorporate a broader inclusion of lecturers' and students' perspectives to assess the scalability of linguistically inclusive pedagogy at UNISA. Overall, UDL represents a promising pathway to reshape higher education in multilingual societies, fostering both academic success and cultural affirmation for diverse student populations.

Disclosures

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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