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Digitally mediated teaching and learning and linguistic inclusivity at Walter Sisulu University: Towards a culturally responsive digital learning environment

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This study examines the role of digital communication in promoting linguistic inclusivity at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), exploring how digital platforms and technologies are utilised to support linguistically diverse students within the institution. As a historically significant university in South Africa, WSU is home to a variety of linguistic communities, many of whom speak indigenous languages that are often marginalised in higher education contexts. This study investigates how digital communication tools, such as online learning platforms, social media and university-specific digital resources, can either facilitate or hinder linguistic inclusivity for students from diverse language backgrounds. Drawing on institutional practices and interviews, the study explores the challenges posed by language barriers, the digital divide and the need for culturally responsive digital strategies. The study adopts a qualitative case study design and draws on semi-structured interviews with 14 students and six academic staff members at WSU, as well as the analysis of institutional digital policy and learning materials. Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns relating to language use, access and pedagogical practices in digital spaces.

Contribution: The findings highlight the importance of developing accessible and inclusive digital communication frameworks at WSU to ensure that all students, regardless of their linguistic heritage, have equitable access to educational opportunities. The study also offers recommendations to enhance linguistic inclusivity in digital spaces at WSU, thereby contributing empirical, context-specific insights into how South African universities can operationalise linguistic inclusivity within digital learning environments.

Keywords: digital; communication; technology; linguistic inclusivity; higher education.

Introduction

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) is a comprehensive rural-based public university located primarily in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (Council on Higher Education 2022). The institution serves a linguistically diverse student population drawn from across the country, with a significant proportion originating from isiXhosa-speaking communities, as well as from Sesotho, Afrikaans, isiZulu and other South-African-language-speaking communities (Statistics South Africa 2024). The university has adopted English, IsiXhosa and Sesotho as official languages, as per its language policy, with English as the language of teaching and learning (WSU Language Policy on Teaching and Learning n.d.). While English remains the primary language of teaching and learning, many students and staff engage academically through multilingual repertoires shaped by home, community and schooling contexts (Heugh 2015; Madiba 2014). The university's Language Policy on Teaching and Learning formally recognises multilingualism and the intellectual value of indigenous African languages. The linguistic profile of WSU is shaped predominantly by isiXhosa, consistent with its Eastern Cape location, where most students and surrounding communities are isiXhosa speakers (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2020). Based on this linguistic reality, the WSU's Transformation and Language Directorate has implemented multilingual initiatives that include translating module guides, glossaries and postgraduate research abstracts into isiXhosa, demonstrating that isiXhosa is the primary language through which the university advances linguistic inclusivity in teaching and learning. In addition, the university offers additional language acquisition programmes in isiXhosa, Sesotho and South African Sign Language, indicating that these languages represent significant segments of the student population and are formally recognised

within WSU's multilingual education framework (WSU Language Policy on Teaching and Learning n.d.). However, the extent to which this policy is operationalised within digital teaching and learning environments remains unclear.

The rapid integration of digital communication technologies and Learning Management Systems (LMS) into teaching and learning has transformed higher education globally, offering new possibilities for access, engagement and collaboration (Alsulami 2025; Herath, Bano & Vasantha 2021). However, this transformation also raises critical questions about linguistic inclusivity and the extent to which digital platforms accommodate learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Despite growing scholarship on digital pedagogy and multilingualism, limited empirical research has examined how South African universities, particularly rural-based institutions such as WSU, operationalise linguistic inclusivity within digital communication environments. Existing studies (such as Gordon, Cumming-Potvin & Chapman 2025; Le Pichon, Cavalcante & Sauvage 2024) rarely examine how institutional language policy, staff practices and students' linguistic repertoires interact to shape digital learning experiences. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence on how multilingual commitments articulated at the policy level are translated into everyday digital teaching and learning practices at WSU.

To address the gap in understanding how multilingual commitments are enacted within digitally mediated learning environments, this study examines how institutional language policy interacts with digital teaching and learning practices and how these practices affect students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Within this context, the study is guided by the overarching question of how digital communication influences the promotion or limitation of linguistic inclusivity in teaching and learning at WSU. More specifically, this study investigates how the university's language policy is reflected in digital communication platforms used for academic engagement, how students and academic staff (AS) experience and perceive language use in digital learning environments and what challenges linguistically diverse students encounter when interacting with institutional digital resources. In addition, the study explores the institutional, pedagogical and infrastructural factors that shape the implementation of linguistic inclusivity in digitally mediated learning spaces.

In line with these questions, the study aims to examine how digital communication practices influence linguistic inclusivity in teaching and learning at WSU. The study further seeks to analyse the extent to which the university's language policy is operationalised on digital platforms, explore students' and AS's experiences of language use in online learning environments and identify the challenges faced by students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. It is envisaged that the study will contribute contextually grounded insights and propose strategies to enhance the promotion of multilingualism and linguistic inclusivity within digital higher education environments.

Literature review

The integration of digital communication technologies into higher education has transformed how knowledge is produced, shared and consumed. Learning Management Systems such as Moodle, Blackboard and Canvas have become central to teaching and learning processes globally, facilitating blended and remote education while promoting collaboration and flexibility (Alsulami 2025; Herath et al. 2021). These platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for access and innovation, yet they also introduce new challenges relating to equity, representation and inclusivity.

In linguistically diverse societies such as South Africa, digital education environments often reproduce historical linguistic hierarchies that privilege English and marginalise indigenous languages. Consequently, the intersection between digital communication and linguistic inclusivity has become a focal point in the broader effort to decolonise higher education. The study is situated within this discourse, addressing gaps in existing scholarship by examining how culturally responsive and multilingual digital pedagogies can promote inclusive learning practices in a South African higher education context, such as WSU.

Digital communication and learning management systems

Digital communication facilitated through LMS platforms plays a crucial role in enhancing engagement, interactivity and continuity in higher education. The shift to online learning during and after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic highlighted the critical importance of LMS in maintaining educational access (Alsulami 2025; Herath et al. 2021). These systems provide diverse communication tools, such as discussion forums, virtual classrooms and digital assessment interfaces, enabling learners to interact beyond time and space.

While some scholars argue that LMS platforms reflect Western-centric and monolingual design frameworks (Androutsopoulos & Lexander 2021; Chuang, Shih & Cheng 2020; Coker 2020), this study adopts a more nuanced position. Learning Management System platforms are largely policy-responsive rather than linguistically deterministic. In contexts such as South Africa, where national and institutional language policies shape pedagogical practice, the linguistic character of digital platforms reflects policy implementation rather than technological incapacity. Therefore, linguistic exclusion within LMS environments is better understood as an outcome of institutional language choices and pedagogical norms rather than as an inherent technological bias.

Similarly, while LMSs such as Moodle and Microsoft Teams are often perceived as linguistically restrictive, these platforms are not inherently monolingual. Rather, their linguistic configuration reflects institutional language policies and pedagogical choices (Madiba 2014; Piller 2016). In the South African higher education context, the dominance of English

within digital learning spaces is therefore less a technological limitation than an institutional one, shaped by long-standing language ideologies, assessment practices and staff capacity (DHET 2020; Heugh 2015). Accordingly, this study does not assume that LMS platforms impose English; instead, it examines how institutional language policy and practice at WSU shape the linguistic character of digital communication.

The DHET Language Policy Framework (2020) promotes multilingualism, the development of African languages for higher education and equitable access to learning. However, scholars note persistent implementation gaps between policy intent and institutional practice, particularly in digital and online learning environments. This study situates WSU within this national policy context, examining how DHET's multilingual commitments are enacted or constrained, within institutional digital communication practices.

Research highlights that while LMS facilitate learning continuity, their effectiveness in multilingual contexts depends on the integration of culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive design principles (Gordon et al. 2025; Le Pichon et al. 2024). Where such considerations are absent, students may experience linguistic marginalisation and reduced engagement. This study does not assume that LMS platforms impose English; instead, it examines how WSU's institutional language policy and practice shape the linguistic character of digital communication.

The literature reveals a significant gap in how LMS are adapted to accommodate linguistic diversity, particularly within African higher education institutions. Most research focuses on technological infrastructure rather than the sociolinguistic dimensions of digital learning. The present study aims to bridge this gap by investigating how LMS platforms at WSU can be adapted to foster linguistic inclusivity. The study examines whether and how integrating multilingual digital tools influences student engagement and learning experiences in linguistically diverse contexts.

Emerging scholarship emphasises that linguistic inclusivity in digital learning is not limited to translation or code-switching but extends to validating all linguistic repertoires as legitimate means of learning and knowledge creation (Sun 2024). Multilingual and culturally adaptive digital tools can help bridge the gap between institutional language policies and students' lived linguistic realities, thereby enhancing both learning outcomes and cultural belonging. The Cultural-Adaptation Digital Learning Integration (CADLI) Framework, for instance, underscores the need to align digital pedagogy with local linguistic and cultural contexts to promote equitable learning opportunities (Bitar & Davidovitch 2024). Likewise, comparative studies in African contexts reveal that digital learning spaces often replicate historical linguistic hierarchies, privileging English and marginalising indigenous languages (Aiseng 2024). This dynamic underscores the urgency of developing contextually grounded approaches that decolonise digital communication and prioritise linguistic inclusivity.

Linguistic inclusivity in digital learning environments

Linguistic inclusivity entails recognising and validating students' linguistic repertoires as valuable resources in the learning process. Le Pichon et al. (2024) contend that multilingual digital tools such as real-time translation features, multilingual content interfaces and adaptive user settings are instrumental in creating inclusive learning environments. These tools allow students to access information in languages that align with their identities, thereby improving understanding and academic performance. They also serve as virtual communities for the students (Reyes, 2019).

Similarly, Sun (2024) argues that linguistic inclusivity extends beyond translation to encompass linguistic justice, in which all languages are regarded as legitimate vehicles of knowledge. This approach is particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts such as South Africa, where colonial languages continue to dominate the academic sphere. By prioritising indigenous languages alongside English, digital education can advance epistemic inclusion and cultural affirmation.

However, much of this scholarship remains aspirational, with limited empirical evidence demonstrating how multilingual digital tools are implemented and sustained in practice, especially within African higher education institutions. This study responds to this need by examining the actual practices, challenges and potential of integrating multilingualism into the LMS at WSU. It also explores whether culturally responsive digital pedagogy positively influences student engagement, motivation and academic performance. By providing localised evidence, the study aims to contribute to the broader global discourse on digital linguistic inclusivity.

Culturally responsive teaching in digital contexts

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is central to fostering equity and inclusivity in digital learning spaces and emphasises integrating learners' cultural and linguistic experiences into pedagogy, thereby making education more relevant and empowering (Gordon et al. 2025; Sancho-Gil et al. 2020). In digital contexts, CRT involves using technology to reflect on and validate students' cultural identities and linguistic repertoires.

Bitar and Davidovitch (2024) propose the CADLI Framework, which underscores the need for educational technologies to align with learners' sociocultural contexts. According to this model, digital learning environments should be designed not as culturally neutral spaces but as adaptive ecosystems that respond to students' linguistic and cultural diversity. Such alignment enhances student engagement, promotes inclusivity and improves learning outcomes.

Nonetheless, the literature identifies a persistent challenge: educators' lack of preparedness to implement culturally

responsive digital pedagogy. Studies reveal that many lecturers lack the necessary digital and intercultural competencies to translate inclusive pedagogical principles into online environments (Gordon et al. 2025). This gap in teacher training and institutional support significantly limits the LMS's potential for inclusivity.

To address this deficiency, the current study investigates the relationships among teacher training, linguistic inclusivity and the effectiveness of LMSs in a multicultural higher education setting. It seeks to bridge the gap by assessing whether educators at WSU are equipped to employ digital communication tools in linguistically inclusive ways. The study further advances the view that teacher training programmes that emphasise linguistic inclusivity enhance the pedagogical effectiveness of LMS. In addition, it explores the potential of digital storytelling as a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, hypothesising that such methods can enhance both language acquisition and intercultural understanding. Through these analyses, the research contributes to a better understanding of how digital pedagogy can operationalise inclusivity in practical and contextually appropriate ways.

Comparative and contextual perspectives

Comparative studies provide valuable insights into how digital communication and linguistic inclusivity manifest across different educational systems. Aiseng (2024) observes that, despite South Africa's progressive language policies, English remains the dominant medium in most digital learning spaces. This linguistic dominance often reflects broader structural inequities that extend from historical patterns of colonialism. In contrast, research from European and Asian contexts demonstrates a more comprehensive integration of multilingual features, including automatic translation, localised content and culturally adaptive LMS design (Chuang et al. 2020).

These comparative findings underscore how institutional commitment, national policy and resource availability influence digital inclusivity. Yet, few studies have systematically examined these dynamics within the African higher education context. The current research addresses this gap by situating WSU's digital inclusivity practices within a broader global framework. It is guided by the assumption that comparative analyses of digital communication strategies across regions reveal significant differences in linguistic inclusivity practices. By situating the South African experience within international discourse, the study aims to generate contextually grounded insights that inform both institutional reform and broader policy development.

The reviewed literature (Aiseng 2024; Gordon et al. 2025) demonstrates that while digital communication technologies and LMS have transformed access to higher education, their potential for inclusivity remains unrealised. Many digital platforms continue to reproduce linguistic and cultural hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Key research gaps persist, including limited longitudinal evidence on the impact of multilingual LMS, insufficient empirical studies from African institutions and inadequate exploration of teacher training for culturally responsive digital pedagogy.

The study directly addresses these gaps by investigating how digital tools and LMSs can be harnessed to promote linguistic inclusivity, enhance educator preparedness and create culturally responsive learning environments. By grounding its analysis in the WSU higher education context in South Africa, the research provides empirical evidence that contributes to the decolonisation of digital education and the advancement of linguistic justice. The literature (Chuang et al. 2020; Sun 2024) supports the argument that the digital transformation of higher education must be guided not only by technological efficiency but also by ethical and cultural imperatives. Building a linguistically inclusive and culturally responsive digital learning environment is essential to ensuring that higher education in South Africa and beyond reflects the diverse voices, languages and identities of all its participants.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that combines Digital Inclusion Theory and Critical Pedagogy. These two perspectives offer complementary lenses for examining how digital teaching and learning practices shape linguistic inclusivity in higher education contexts. While digital technologies are often presented as tools for expanding access to education, their design and use may reproduce existing inequalities if issues of language, participation and power are not adequately addressed. Digital Inclusion Theory enables the study to examine the structural and technological conditions that influence students' ability to participate in digital learning environments. Critical Pedagogy, in turn, provides a normative and analytical perspective for interrogating how power relations and language ideologies shape whose voices and linguistic identities are recognised or marginalised within these environments. Together, these frameworks allow the study to analyse how access to digital platforms, institutional language practices and pedagogical choices intersect to shape students' learning experiences at WSU. By integrating these two perspectives, the study moves beyond a purely technological understanding of digital learning and instead situates digital communication within broader questions of equity, participation and linguistic justice in higher education.

Digital inclusion perspective

Digital Inclusion Theory provides an important lens for understanding how access to digital education extends beyond the availability of technological infrastructure to include meaningful participation in digitally mediated learning environments. Within higher education, digital inclusion involves not only access to devices and internet connectivity but also students' ability to navigate digital platforms, engage with learning materials and participate

effectively in online academic communication. In this study, digital inclusion is understood as the capacity of students and AS to engage meaningfully with digital learning environments, regardless of their linguistic or socio-economic backgrounds. This perspective highlights several key issues, including disparities in students' access to digital resources, differences in digital literacy levels and the linguistic accessibility of digital learning materials and platforms.

Applying this perspective to the WSU context enables the study to examine how digital LMS and institutional communication platforms may either support or constrain student participation from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Particular attention is paid to how digital platforms are designed, the language used in online learning materials and the extent to which these environments enable equitable participation for multilingual students. Through this lens, linguistic inclusivity becomes an important dimension of digital inclusion. If digital learning platforms operate predominantly in a single language and do not accommodate students' multilingual repertoires, they may inadvertently reproduce forms of exclusion even with technological access.

Critical pedagogical perspective

While Digital Inclusion Theory highlights issues of access and participation, critical pedagogy provides the normative and analytical grounding for examining the power relations embedded in digital learning environments. Rooted in traditions of emancipatory education, critical pedagogy emphasises the importance of recognising learners' voices, experiences and identities within educational processes. From this perspective, language is not simply a neutral medium of instruction but a key site at which power, identity and knowledge production are negotiated. Educational practices that privilege a single dominant language may silence alternative ways of knowing and limit students' ability to participate fully in academic discourse.

In the context of digital learning, critical pedagogy encourages a critical examination of how institutional practices and digital communication platforms shape which languages are legitimised and which voices are marginalised. It also foregrounds the importance of dialogic, inclusive pedagogical practices that allow students to engage meaningfully with course content and one another. In the WSU context, this perspective enables the study to explore how digital communication practices shape students' sense of belonging, voice and participation in online learning spaces. It also enables the analysis of how institutional language policies and pedagogical decisions may either reinforce or challenge existing linguistic hierarchies in higher education.

The strength of this study lies in integrating Digital Inclusion Theory and Critical Pedagogy as complementary analytical perspectives. Digital Inclusion Theory provides the structural lens for analysing access to digital technologies and participation in online learning environments, while critical pedagogy foregrounds the power dynamics that shape language use, voice and educational equity. Together, these perspectives allow the study to examine how technological design, institutional language practices and pedagogical approaches interact to influence linguistic inclusivity in digital communication environments. For example, the predominance of English on digital platforms can be interpreted simultaneously as a digital inclusion issue affecting equitable participation and as a pedagogical concern linked to voice, identity and epistemic justice. By applying this integrated framework to the WSU context, the study provides a theoretically grounded analysis of how linguistic inclusivity is produced, negotiated or constrained in digitally mediated teaching and learning spaces. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on digital equity, multilingualism and socially just pedagogical practices in South African higher education.

Research methods and design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising semi-structured interviews and document analysis as the primary data collection methods. This qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring context-specific practices, perceptions and institutional dynamics (Creswell & Poth 2018; Yin 2018), particularly in a multilingual context such as that of WSU. It is important to note that WSU operates within a multilingual context, with students and staff routinely engaging in multiple languages across academic and social spaces. Institutional policy documents and national higher education data indicate that isiXhosa is the most widely spoken home language among a significant proportion of students at the university, although English remains the dominant language of teaching, learning and formal academic communication (DHET 2020; Statistics South Africa 2022; WSU Language Policy n.d.). This multilingual reality provides the backdrop for digital teaching and learning practices at WSU. Semi-structured interviews enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, while document analysis facilitated examination of institutional language policy and digital communication guidelines (Bowen 2009).

The study focused on two participant groups: undergraduate students and AS from the Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience of digital teaching and learning and to ensure representation of linguistic diversity. Fourteen undergraduate students and six AS members were selected, yielding a total sample of 20 participants. Four of the students speak Sesotho, while the others (16) speak isiXhosa. Two of the staff speak Sesotho, while the others (4) speak isiXhosa as their primary language. This sample size aligns with qualitative research norms that prioritise depth over breadth (Guest, MacQueen & Namey 2012). Administrators were excluded to maintain methodological coherence and focus on lived pedagogical experiences. These participants were key to understanding the pedagogical practices employed in digital spaces and

the challenges they face in promoting linguistic inclusivity. Their perspectives were crucial in understanding institutional strategies for addressing linguistic diversity through digital means.

Data collection involved two key methods, namely interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams to accommodate participants' availability and geographical dispersion. Virtual interviews also reflected the digital environments under investigation, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences within the same platforms used for teaching and learning. These interviews focused on their perceptions of linguistic inclusivity in the digital tools used at WSU, the strategies employed to address linguistic diversity and the challenges faced in adapting the digital tools to support linguistically diverse students.

In addition to the interviews, the study also employed document analysis. Institutional documents analysed included WSU's Language Policy on Teaching and Learning, selected faculty guidelines, digital policy guidelines, website content and publicly available digital learning resources. These documents provided insight into official multilingual commitments and their translation into digital practice. The analysis assessed how WSU currently addresses linguistic diversity in its digital communication tools and practices.

Data were analysed by using thematic analysis as per Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, involving familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme development, review, definition and interpretation across both interview transcripts and institutional documents. The analysis focused on recurring themes from the interviews and document analysis, including challenges related to language access, the effectiveness of digital engagement strategies and institutional efforts to improve inclusivity in digital communication tools.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study, and ethical clearance was obtained. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, procedures and their rights, including the voluntary nature of participation and the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants' identities were kept confidential, with pseudonyms used in reporting the findings to ensure privacy. All data were securely stored and only accessible to the researcher. The study prioritised fairness and respect for all participants, creating a safe and supportive environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Sensitive issues related to language barriers or technological exclusion were handled with care, ensuring participants' support throughout the research process.

Data triangulation was achieved through interviews and document analysis to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Member checking was conducted informally during interviews to confirm participants' intended meanings, while an audit trail was maintained through systematic documentation of coding decisions. Given that the study is a case study, the results cannot be generalised.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty Research and Ethics Committee, which was further submitted to the Division of Research and Internationalisation Office. After due consideration, an ethics clearance certificate was issued by the Authority of Senate Research Ethics Committee (No. 20/01/09/2025/DRI).

Results

This section presents and discusses the study's findings, drawing on data generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The findings illuminate how digital communication practices at WSU shape linguistic inclusivity within a multilingual higher education context. They indicate that challenges experienced in digital learning environments at WSU stem primarily from language practices shaped by institutional policy and pedagogical norms, rather than from the technological limitations of the platforms themselves. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: (1) current digital communication practices, (2) linguistic inclusivity in digital spaces, (3) challenges to inclusivity, and (4) opportunities for improvement. Where relevant, findings are contextualised by using existing scholarship and illustrative institutional comparisons.

Discussion

Current digital communication practices at Walter Sisulu University

Digital communication tools play a central role in teaching and learning within the Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Sciences at WSU. Key platforms include the Learning Management System (Moodle or WiSeUp), video conferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams, and social media applications, including WhatsApp. The LMS facilitates content delivery, assessments and discussion forums, yet it remains predominantly English-based and offers limited support for multilingual content, posing challenges for linguistically diverse students (Alsulami 2025; Herath et al. 2021). Video conferencing tools have become increasingly important for synchronous instruction, particularly during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting broader global trends in digital learning adoption (Herath et al. 2021). Social media platforms provide informal channels for peer collaboration, discussion and coordination of learning activities outside the LMS, supporting student engagement in less formal yet pedagogically meaningful ways (Le Pichon et al. 2024).

Participants across both groups identified the Learning Management System (Moodle/WiSeUp), Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp as the primary digital communication tools used for teaching, learning and academic coordination. While these platforms were widely regarded as essential for content

delivery and communication, participants highlighted uneven implementation and limited pedagogical support, resulting in poor communication.

One AS member noted:

> 'We are expected to use the LMS for everything, but many of us were never properly trained on how to use it beyond uploading notes. We are thus unable to communicate properly on the platform.' (AS1)

Another said:

> 'The university expects us to use the LMS, but many lecturers were never formally trained beyond basic functions like uploading content. Most lecturers are not aware of how to use the platform for effective communication with students.' (AS2)

A recurring concern from the above responses is the lack of adequate training for lecturers. While the university mandates the use of the LMS for multiple instructional functions, its effective use is hindered by limited digital pedagogical support. This lacuna restricts meaningful interaction between staff and students and weakens the potential of the LMS as a comprehensive communication environment.

To support this concern, a staff member said, 'Digital communication is largely self-driven. If a lecturer is confident with technology, students benefit; if not, the platform becomes underused' (AS3).

Some staff members confirmed the absence of standardised institutional monitoring mechanisms, observing that digital practices often depended on individual lecturers' digital competence rather than institutional policy. They noted that:

> 'There is no standard institutional model for digital communication. Each department tends to develop its own practices, which creates inconsistency.' (AS4)

> 'Though we are provided with the platforms, monitoring how we use them academically is limited.' (AS5)

From these responses, the participants' views collectively point to a broader institutional challenge in which the absence of a standardised digital communication framework results in inconsistent practices across departments, limited coherence in communication strategies and uneven adoption of available platforms.

Students' accounts consistently reflected the multilingual composition of WSU, with isiXhosa emerging as the dominant home language despite English being the sole language of digital instruction. Students similarly reported variability among lecturers: some actively engaged students through discussion forums and recorded lectures, while others relied solely on static content uploads. Below are the views of some students:

> 'Some lecturers use the LMS properly, with discussions and explanations, but others just upload slides and expect us to understand on our own.' (S1)

> 'Most of our communication happens on Moodle and WhatsApp, but how useful it is depends on the lecturer. Some explain things clearly online, while others just upload slides without guidance.' (S2)

> 'We use Teams for some classes, but there is no consistency. In one module it works well, and in another it is hardly used at all.' (S3)

Students' views reinforce the pattern of inconsistency already highlighted by staff, showing that the effectiveness of digital communication tools varies widely across individual lecturers rather than across institutional standards. While the same platforms, Moodle, WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams, are used across modules, students experience uneven levels of engagement, with some lecturers providing interactive discussions and clear online explanations, while others rely on minimal content uploading with no guidance. This lack of uniform practice across modules creates uncertainty for students and limits the pedagogical value of the available digital tools, demonstrating that both access and usage quality are inconsistent across the learning environment.

The analysis of WSU's Language Policy reveals a formal institutional commitment to multilingualism and the promotion of African languages in teaching and learning. However, the policy provides limited guidance on the practical operationalisation of multilingualism within digital teaching and learning platforms, which may contribute to inconsistencies between stated policy intentions and everyday digital pedagogical practices (WSU, Language Policy on Teaching and Learning, Section 3).

These findings suggest that while WSU has embraced digital platforms, their pedagogical effectiveness and inclusivity remain inconsistent, echoing broader concerns in the literature regarding uneven digital integration in higher education (Bitar & Davidovitch 2024; Chuang et al. 2020; Gordon et al. 2025; Le Pichon et al. 2024).

Linguistic exclusivity in digital spaces

A dominant theme across the interviews was the overwhelming use of English in digital learning environments, despite the multilingual composition of the student population. Students whose home languages included isiXhosa, Sesotho and other languages reported that English-dominated digital content constrained comprehension and participation. This opinion is evident in the students' reflections below.

> 'When everything is explained in English, especially difficult concepts, it becomes hard to follow because at home we think and explain things in isiXhosa.' (S4)

> 'Most of the information on the LMS is only in English, which makes it difficult to fully understand complex concepts when English is not your home language.' (S5)

> 'All the online material is in English, even when the lecturer explains better in class using isiXhosa. Online, that support disappears.' (S6)

> 'When concepts are difficult, I understand better if they are explained in my home language, but that rarely happens on the LMS.' (S7)

Students' perspectives highlight a persistent linguistic disadvantage in online learning spaces, where the exclusive reliance on English makes it difficult for many of them to engage deeply with complex academic content. Although students often receive more accessible explanations in isiXhosa during face-to-face interactions, this support is rarely extended to the LMS or other digital platforms, creating a gap between classroom understanding and online comprehension. As a result, students struggle to grasp difficult concepts when learning independently, suggesting a need for more linguistically inclusive digital practices that recognise the role of home language in mediating understanding.

To support the students' comments, AS acknowledged this challenge, particularly in content-heavy or technical disciplines. Some lecturers remarked as follows:

> 'Legal language is already complex, so when students struggle with English, the digital platform just adds another layer of difficulty.' (AS6)

> 'English is the default language on all digital platforms, even though we know many students struggle with it academically.' (AS1)

> 'Using indigenous languages online would help students, but no guidance or policy is encouraging us to do so.' (AS2)

Academic staff echoed students' concerns by noting that the predominance of English across digital platforms compounds the challenges students already face with linguistically complex content, particularly in disciplines such as law. They acknowledged that many students struggle academically with English, yet the current digital environment offers no mechanisms, guidelines or policy support for integrating indigenous languages to enhance comprehension. As a result, lecturers feel constrained by platform defaults and institutional expectations, even though they recognise that multilingual support online would significantly improve students' understanding of difficult material.

Some staff members confirmed that the university lacked a formal framework for integrating multilingual support into digital platforms, noting that linguistic inclusivity was often treated as an informal or optional practice rather than an institutional priority. Their views include the following:

> 'Linguistic inclusivity is recognised in policy discussions, but it has not yet been formally integrated into digital communication strategies.' (AS3)

> 'At an institutional level, English remains the operational language, including on digital platforms.' (AS4)

The above responses indicate that although linguistic inclusivity is acknowledged in institutional policy discussions, it has not yet translated into concrete strategies for digital communication or online pedagogy. English continues to function as the default operational language across all digital platforms, reinforcing a monolingual approach that overlooks students' multilingual realities. This gap between policy intent and practical implementation suggests that institutional commitments to linguistic diversity remain conceptual rather than operational, leaving online learning spaces largely inaccessible to students who rely on their home languages for deeper comprehension.

These findings reflect broader concerns in higher education regarding the marginalisation of minority languages in digital learning and underscore the need for socio-linguistically responsive educational technologies (Bitar & Davidovitch 2024; Le Pichon et al. 2024). While students sometimes rely on online translation tools to navigate language barriers, they noted limitations in accuracy, nuance and disciplinary specificity, often leading to misunderstandings or incomplete comprehension of complex academic content. These experiences align with existing research indicating that automated translation services remain inadequate for African languages, particularly in higher education contexts (Sun 2024).

In line with principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, the findings highlight the critical importance of incorporating multilingual digital content and localised learning resources. Such approaches can bridge linguistic gaps, enhance participation and comprehension, and support equitable learning outcomes for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Bitar & Davidovitch 2024; Gordon et al. 2025). By integrating multilingual strategies, digital learning environments can better align with both students' sociolinguistic realities and the broader goals of digital inclusion and critical pedagogy.

Challenges to linguistic inclusivity

Three interrelated challenges emerged strongly from the data: technological access, language dominance and digital literacy.

Access to technology was identified as a significant barrier, particularly for students from rural areas. Some students explained:

> 'Sometimes I miss online discussions because the network is poor at home, and I cannot always afford data.' (S8)

> 'Network problems and lack of data make it worse. Even when I want to participate online, I cannot always access the platforms.' (S9)

These views from the students point to structural barriers that limit their participation in online learning. These challenges often prevent them from consistently accessing online platforms, even when they are willing and motivated to engage. As a result, participation in online discussions becomes irregular and dependent on external circumstances

beyond their control, highlighting how infrastructural inequalities continue to shape and constrain the digital learning experience.

This finding was supported by one of the AS, who said: 'Infrastructure challenges, especially for rural students, remain a major obstacle to equitable digital participation' (AS5).

Language dominance was consistently cited as a limiting factor in active participation. Students described relying on informal peer translation through WhatsApp groups, which, while helpful, was often inaccurate. They stated that:

> 'We explain things to each other in our own language, but sometimes the meaning changes because the English terms do not translate well.' (S10)
>
> 'I often rely on classmates to explain things in isiXhosa on WhatsApp because the official explanations are only in English.' (S11)

Students' reflections indicate that while peer support in isiXhosa plays a crucial role in helping them make sense of English-medium academic content, it also introduces challenges, including meaning loss or distortion during informal translation. This observation highlights a deeper linguistic tension in the learning process. Although translanguaging practices offer essential support, the absence of structured multilingual resources or lecturer-guided explanations leaves students vulnerable to inaccuracies as they navigate complex material collaboratively.

Digital literacy also varied significantly among both students and staff. The AS members noted:

> 'Even if we want to make the content more inclusive, many of us do not know how to create multilingual or accessible digital materials.' (AS6)
>
> 'We recognise the language barriers, but digital constraints and time pressures make it difficult to offer multilingual support.' (AS1)
>
> 'There is also a skills issue. Many lecturers do not know how to design multilingual or accessible digital materials.' (AS2)
>
> 'Digital literacy is uneven across both students and staff, which affects how inclusive online communication can be.' (AS3)

Academic staff emphasised that although they recognise the value of multilingual and accessible digital materials, many lack the practical skills required to design such resources. As a result, lecturers who are aware of linguistic barriers often feel constrained by their own digital competencies and by the absence of institutional training or support structures, underscoring a skills gap that directly affects the inclusivity and effectiveness of digital learning environments.

These intersecting challenges highlight how linguistic exclusion in digital learning is not solely a language issue but is compounded by infrastructural and skills-related inequalities. This finding aligns with Digital Inclusion Theory, which emphasises that meaningful participation requires more than access; it requires capacity and cultural relevance (De Oliveira Gomes & Cole Tavares Santos 2021). Addressing access, language support and digital competencies is thus essential for fostering equitable participation, supporting multilingual learning and operationalising culturally responsive digital pedagogy (Bitar & Davidovitch 2024; Le Pichon et al. 2024).

Opportunities for improvement and comparative insights

Both groups of participants proposed practical strategies for enhancing linguistic inclusivity in digital spaces. Students suggested multilingual lecture summaries and recorded explanations in indigenous languages, while staff emphasised the need for institutional training and clear policy guidance.

Some students said:

> 'It would help if lecturers could provide short explanations or summaries in our home languages, especially for complex topics.' (S12)
>
> 'Even recorded explanations where lecturers mix English with indigenous languages would make a big difference.' (S13)
>
> 'We would appreciate it if the learning materials were translated into our home language so that we can understand better.' (S14)

The above responses express the strong desire of the students for more multilingual support in digital learning environments to help improve their understanding of complex academic content. They indicate that recorded materials that integrate both English and indigenous languages, as well as translated learning resources, would make digital content more accessible and reduce the comprehension barriers created by monolingual online instruction. These suggestions highlight a clear student preference for structured multilingual scaffolding, demonstrating that linguistic inclusivity is not only a matter of preference but also a practical requirement for equitable digital learning.

On the same theme, AS members noted the following:

> 'If the university provided training and templates for multilingual digital content as UCT [University of Cape Town] and Wits do, more lecturers would be willing to try.' (AS4)
>
> 'Clear institutional guidelines, like those of Wits and other institutions, would help normalise linguistic inclusivity instead of leaving it to individual choice.' (AS5)
>
> 'If the university had clear guidelines and support like UCT, it would be easier for departments to implement inclusive digital practices consistently.' (AS6)
>
> 'There is potential to strengthen inclusivity through policy, training, and resource allocation, but it requires institutional commitment.' (AS1)
>
> 'We need a coordinated strategy that links language policy with digital teaching and learning initiatives.' (AS2)

In their responses, the AS have stressed that meaningful multilingual and inclusive digital practices require strong institutional support. They note that while there is evident

potential to enhance inclusivity through targeted policy development, coordinated training and appropriate resource allocation, such progress depends on institutional commitment. Participants argue for a unified strategy that explicitly links language policy with digital teaching and learning initiatives, enabling departments to consistently implement inclusive practices and reduce reliance on *ad hoc*, lecturer-driven efforts.

Comparative insights drawn from existing studies on institutions such as the University of Cape Town and Wits University were used illustratively to highlight possible benchmarks. These institutions have experimented with multilingual resources and targeted digital literacy initiatives, offering examples of how institutional commitment can enhance inclusivity (Le Pichon et al. 2024). While not empirical comparisons, these cases provide contextually relevant reference points for WSU's potential development. In essence, lessons from UCT and Wits provide a roadmap for WSU to systematically address linguistic and technological barriers, bridge gaps in multilingual support and digital access, and thereby enhance the reach and effectiveness of digital learning platforms. These comparisons are not presented as empirical evaluations, but as illustrative examples drawn from existing studies, highlighting potential practices that could inform institutional reform at WSU.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital communication tools at WSU hold significant potential to support linguistic inclusivity but are currently constrained by English dominance, uneven digital literacy and limited institutional coordination. Importantly, the themes presented here emerge directly from participant experiences, underscoring the need for structured, linguistically responsive digital strategies that align with students' sociocultural realities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge to strengthen linguistic inclusivity in WSU's digital communication. These recommendations are grounded in participant perspectives and address the intersecting challenges of language dominance, digital literacy and technological access.

Policy and institutional measures

Implementation of a multilingual policy: Walter Sisulu University should formalise a multilingual policy that promotes the systematic integration of indigenous languages into academic and digital spaces. Students emphasised the need for home language support when they said that 'Even a summary in isiXhosa would help me understand better' (S5). Similarly, AS also highlighted the need for institutional backing as seen in the following statement: 'Policy and guidance would encourage lecturers to include indigenous languages online' (AS4).

Strengthening digital infrastructure: Investment in reliable Internet connectivity, device provision and data subsidies is essential to reduce inequities. The importance of bridging the digital divide cannot be overemphasised. Without proper infrastructure, multilingual initiatives may not reach rural students. This point was echoed by one of the students who said: 'Sometimes I cannot join Teams because the Internet is too slow, especially at home' (S6).

Faculty development and capacity building: Ongoing professional development should equip AS with digital literacy skills and strategies for inclusive pedagogy. This view emerged from staff members' responses, as exemplified by this statement: 'Training would help me create content in both English and isiXhosa' (AS5). Structured programmes would empower lecturers to operationalise CRT online.

Digital platform design and content enhancement

Multilingual LMS interfaces: Moodle/WiSeUp should incorporate multilingual navigation and content access. Students highlighted the practical need by saying that 'Being able to read instructions in my language would save a lot of confusion' (S14).

Creation of localised and culturally relevant content: Digital resources should reflect WSU's linguistic and cultural diversity. Students believed that this would improve their learning experiences, as evidenced by the statement, 'Lectures with some explanations in isiXhosa would make learning easier' (S10). In addition, AS agreed that collaboration with linguists and instructional designers is crucial for producing accurate, contextually appropriate materials. One lecturer explained that 'working with a linguist would help ensure that translated concepts retained their academic meaning, while instructional designers would make sure the material is accessible and pedagogically sound for online delivery' (AS11).

Incorporation of accessibility features: Inclusive features such as text-to-speech, screen-reader compatibility and subtitled videos would support both linguistic inclusivity and accessibility. This view came from a student who said, 'Screen reading in my language would help me follow along with lecture materials more confidently' (S2).

These recommendations collectively address the intersection of language, technology and pedagogy, positioning WSU as a leader in multilingual, culturally responsive digital education. By implementing these recommendations, WSU can address the intersecting challenges of language, technology and pedagogy, creating a holistic, inclusive digital learning ecosystem. These measures would position WSU as a leader in promoting multilingual, culturally responsive and equitable higher education in South Africa, while providing practical strategies for bridging linguistic and technological gaps that impede full student participation.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical need to prioritise linguistic inclusivity in digital communication at WSU. While platforms

such as Moodle (WiSeUp), Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp have transformed teaching and learning, they remain predominantly English-centric, creating barriers for students whose first language is an indigenous language, such as isiXhosa, Sesotho or Zulu. Students consistently reported difficulty accessing English-only content. Meanwhile, AS acknowledged the gap in support and training. The study highlights the compounding effect of digital inequalities, particularly for students from rural or underserved backgrounds. Variations in digital literacy among students and staff further constrain the effectiveness of LMS and other online platforms. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic, systemic approach that integrates multilingual policy, inclusive pedagogy and technological support.

Generally, the study demonstrates that linguistic inclusivity in digital learning is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity. Ultimately, this research shows that WSU, and similar higher education institutions, can leverage digital technologies as bridges rather than barriers, fostering equitable, culturally responsive and linguistically affirming educational experiences. By implementing multilingual strategies, CRT and digital literacy programmes, WSU can enhance engagement, comprehension and academic outcomes for linguistically diverse students. Thoughtfully designed digital platforms can advance linguistic justice, social inclusion and epistemic equity, transforming English-dominated spaces into inclusive learning environments.

In conclusion, digital education requires a paradigm shift, from a model focused primarily on technological efficiency to one anchored in human diversity, linguistic justice and cultural responsiveness. This approach holds transformative potential for higher education across Africa and globally, ensuring that all students can engage meaningfully, access knowledge equitably and have their linguistic and cultural identities affirmed in the digital learning environment. These conclusions are grounded in participants' accounts of language barriers, uneven digital access and limited institutional guidance, which collectively shape the digital learning experience at WSU.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Beatrice Ekanjume: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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