

Preserving African indigenous languages through visualized GenAI academic literacy

Chapter Proposal

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa's indigenous languages remain endangered despite constitutional recognition and legislative protection. Within higher education, English continues to dominate as the primary medium of instruction, often marginalising students' linguistic and cultural identities. This creates a disconnect, positioning African languages outside mainstream academic disciplines and reinforcing a monolingual bias that undermines students' sense of belonging. This chapter presents insights from an innovative academic literacy project conducted with first-year humanities students. The project explored how integrating Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) for image creation, traditional narrative writing, and translanguaging practices could enhance students' disciplinary engagement and conceptual understanding. By blending multilingual expression with visual tools, the initiative aimed to affirm students' linguistic repertoires, strengthen their disciplinary identities, and promote inclusive knowledge production. The results were promising. Students actively used their home and community languages - often excluded in mainstream subjects - to co-create knowledge, effectively breaking the monolingual barrier. The integration of GenAI-generated visuals alongside written narratives allowed for multimodal expression, overcoming the limitation of text-only communication and enabling deeper, more culturally resonant learning. However, the project also revealed key challenges. For such approaches to be sustainable, both students and staff require two forms of support.

1. Historical awareness - to recognise and revive pre-colonial African traditions of visual knowledge representation, creating a pedagogical continuity between past and present.
2. Technical training - targeted instruction in using GenAI tools effectively and ethically within disciplinary contexts.

In conclusion, combining GenAI-generated visuals with multilingual academic practices can empower students, foster inclusivity, and support the revitalization of African indigenous languages in higher education. To fully realise this potential, institutions must invest in both cultural pedagogy and technological literacy, ensuring that innovation serves equity, identity and epistemic justice.