

# The Power of Mother Tongue: A Critical Analysis of Language Exclusion in Qualitative Research and Its Implications for Narrative Depth

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## ABSTRACT

Research loses its voice when participants are required to borrow someone else's tongue. This study critically explores how language exclusion, particularly the dominance of English in qualitative research, limits narrative depth, emotional expression, and cultural authenticity in studies that depend on lived experiences to understand complex social realities. While qualitative research aspires to amplify participant voice, it often marginalises that very voice by failing to encourage responses in participants' own languages. This is especially prevalent in multilingual contexts such as South Africa, where researchers frequently avoid multilingual interviewing due to budgetary constraints, particularly the costs of translation and transcription. Adopting a qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm, this study uses a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data. The population consists of published qualitative studies across various social science fields, conducted in multilingual settings between 2015 and 2025. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 studies that relied heavily on interviews or focus groups. The data collection method involved document review and systematic coding of selected studies, while thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis were employed to examine how language use was addressed or ignored and how it influenced the quality of findings. Findings reveal that in most cases, researchers failed to provide space for mother-tongue responses, leading to superficial data, distorted meaning, and loss of cultural nuance. Studies that did incorporate indigenous languages showed greater emotional intensity, clearer narrative coherence, and deeper insight into lived experiences. These findings have broad implications; they point to a persistent methodological weakness rooted in financial and institutional neglect of language diversity. The study contributes to the decolonial and linguistic justice discourse by proposing a language-conscious framework for qualitative research design and evaluation.

**Keywords:** Language Exclusion, Mother-Tongue, Qualitative Research, Narrative Depth, Multilingualism.

## INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research is widely celebrated for its capacity to illuminate lived experience, yet its methodological foundations often rest on an unexamined linguistic contradiction. Scholars argue that research loses its interpretive depth when participants are compelled to narrate their realities in a language that is not their own (Esposito, 2001; Keysar, Hayakawa & An, 2012; Boéri & Giustini, 2024). Despite claims that qualitative inquiry prioritises voice, meaning, and subjectivity, participants are frequently required to articulate deeply personal and culturally embedded experiences in English, a language that may only partially reflect their inner worlds (Van Nes et al., 2010; Dahal, 2023). Therefore, it is evident that this tension reveals a provocative paradox, since qualitative research that seeks depth may, through its language choices, systematically produce shallowness.

However, based on the researcher's previous experiences during data collection, it was observed that several participants would struggle to fully articulate their thoughts and lived experiences in English, particularly when discussing complex or emotionally charged issues. Many responses were superficial, fragmented, or lacked the emotional and cultural depth that would have been conveyed in their mother tongue. These observations underscore the structural limitations of requiring participants to respond in a second language, confirming that narrative depth is closely tied to linguistic access.

Language has long been theorised as more than a communicative tool. It is understood as a constitutive element of thought, identity, and social reality (Bourdieu, 1991; Aliyeva, 2023). From a sociolinguistic and interpretivist perspective, meaning is constructed through language, and the limits of language shape the limits of expression (Sapir, 2024; Whorf, 2012; Eckert, 2019). Consequently, Pavlenko (2005) posits that when participants are denied the use of their mother tongue, their narratives are not merely translated but transformed, often reduced in emotional intensity, metaphorical richness, and cultural specificity. It is therefore widely acknowledged that the language of data collection directly influences what can be known, analysed, and ultimately claimed as knowledge (Squires, 2009).

Nevertheless, the dominance of English in qualitative research remains largely unquestioned. Navarro (2022) views English as having been positioned as the global academic lingua franca, conferring legitimacy and circulation to research outputs. This dominance has been described as a form of linguistic imperialism, through which certain languages and knowledge systems are elevated while others are marginalised (Lukianenko, 2024; Brinkman, 2024). Mignolo (2011) contends that research conducted exclusively in English reproduces epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial histories, particularly in the Global South. Thus, while these critiques are well established at a macro level, their implications for qualitative methodology and narrative depth remain theoretically underdeveloped.

In multilingual contexts such as South Africa, this issue is especially salient. Although eleven official spoken languages are constitutionally recognised, English continues to dominate higher education, research ethics processes, and academic publishing (Heugh, 2015; Hyland, 2016; Soler, 2019). Lasagabaster (2025) observed that many qualitative studies conducted in South African communities rely on English-only interviews, even when participants are more fluent in indigenous languages. Researchers often justify this practice by citing budgetary limitations, time constraints, and the perceived complexity of translation and transcription (Abfalter, Mueller-Seeger & Raich, 2021; Kaiper, 2018). As a result, language choice is routinely framed as a logistical consideration rather than as a theoretical or epistemological concern (Molokomme, 2025).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that conducting interviews in a non-mother tongue constrains participants' ability to express emotion, narrate complex experiences, and engage reflexively with sensitive topics (Van Nes et al., 2010; Sapir, 2024). Allen (2018) opined that participants tend to provide shorter, less detailed responses when interviewed in a second language, often resorting to simplified vocabulary and surface-level descriptions. Therefore, it is conspicuous that the link between language and data quality is rarely theorised beyond technical discussions of translation accuracy or interviewer competence.

This reveals a significant theoretical gap in the qualitative research literature. Although scholars consistently call for rich, in-depth, and contextually grounded narratives, limited theoretical attention has been paid to how language exclusion systematically undermines narrative depth itself. Narrative depth is frequently assumed rather than conceptualised, and seldom examined as a function of linguistic access. As a result, the literature remains largely silent on how requiring participants to respond in English shapes the structure, coherence, and emotional texture of their narratives. This silence is particularly striking given that the majority of participants in qualitative studies conducted in multilingual societies are not native English speakers.

From an interpretivist standpoint, this omission is theoretically problematic. Interpretivism rests on the assumption that meaning emerges through language, interaction, and shared understanding (Schwandt, 2014). When participants are denied their primary linguistic resources, the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant is fundamentally altered. Sapir (2024) argued that such practices lead to epistemic loss, as certain experiences become unsayable or are reshaped to fit the expressive limits of English. Yet, despite these implications, qualitative methodology texts and empirical studies seldom engage critically with language choice as a determinant of narrative depth and interpretive validity.

The present study is situated within this theoretical silence. Rather than treating language as a neutral or secondary methodological issue, it foregrounds language exclusion as a central analytic concern. By critically analysing published qualitative studies conducted in multilingual settings, this research examines how language use is theorised, justified, or ignored, and how these decisions affect narrative richness and meaning making. In doing so, the study shifts the focus from practical constraints to theoretical accountability.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in the premise that meaning, experience, and knowledge are inextricably bound to language. In qualitative research, where understanding social reality depends on participants' narratives, theory plays a critical role in explaining how meaning is constructed, communicated, and interpreted (Parikh, 2000). This study draws on three interrelated theoretical traditions, which are interpretivist epistemology, sociolinguistic theory, and decolonial thought, to interrogate how language exclusion, particularly the dominance of English, shapes narrative construction and constrains narrative depth. While each of these bodies of theory has made significant contributions to understanding language and meaning, they have remained largely silent on narrative depth as a theoretically mediated outcome of linguistic access. This theoretical framework, therefore, provides the foundation upon which the study's conceptual contribution is built.

### Interpretivist Epistemology and Meaning-Making

Interpretivist epistemology is premised on the assumption that social reality is not objective or fixed, but is socially constructed through human interaction and shared meaning (Schwandt, 2014). From this perspective, qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and how these interpretations are articulated through language (Davis, 1995). Meaning is not merely discovered but co-constructed between researcher and participant through dialogue, context, and interpretation (Mikuska & Lyndon, 2021).

However, Creswell and Poth (2016) argue that language is central to interpretivist inquiry because it is the primary medium through which meaning is expressed and negotiated. Participants' narratives are therefore not neutral descriptions of reality but linguistically mediated representations of lived experience. When participants are required to communicate in a second or third language, the interpretive process is fundamentally altered. The meanings conveyed are filtered through linguistic constraints, often leading to partial or distorted representations of experience (Van Nes et al., 2010).

Despite this centrality of language, interpretivist qualitative research has tended to assume linguistic competence without interrogating its implications. Narrative depth is often attributed to interviewer skill or analytic rigor, while the language of data generation remains theoretically underexamined (McCormack, 2004). This study builds on interpretivist assumptions but extends them by arguing that narrative depth itself is contingent upon participants' ability to access their full linguistic repertoire. Without such access, the interpretive process is constrained at its point of origin.

### Sociolinguistic Theory

Sociolinguistic theory emerged through the foundational work of scholars such as William Labov, Dell Hymes, and later Pierre Bourdieu, who collectively demonstrated that language is a social practice shaped by culture, power, identity, and context rather than a neutral system of grammar (Labov, 1972; Hymes, 2013; Bourdieu, 1991). The theory posits that how individuals speak, what they can express, and how their speech is valued are socially structured, meaning that language choice directly influences meaning-making, emotional expression, and narrative construction.

Sociolinguistic theory conceptualises language as a social practice that reflects and shapes identity, culture, and cognition (Bourdieu, 1991). Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it carries symbolic power, emotional meaning, and culturally embedded ways of understanding the world. According to Bourdieu (1991), linguistic exchanges are also relations of power, where certain languages are legitimised while others are devalued.

Research in sociolinguistics has demonstrated that individuals experience and express emotions differently depending on the language they use (Pavlenko, 2005). Mother tongues are often associated with deeper emotional resonance, cultural metaphors, and embodied memory, whereas second languages tend to encourage emotional distancing and cognitive control. Cook and Dewaele (2022) showed that speakers are more likely to narrate traumatic or sensitive experiences with greater nuance and intensity in their first language than in an acquired language.

In qualitative research, these sociolinguistic insights have been acknowledged primarily in discussions of translation and cross-language interviewing. However, the broader theoretical implication, that language choice structurally shapes narrative form and depth, has received limited attention. By drawing on sociolinguistic theory, this study foregrounds language as a determinant of narrative coherence, metaphorical richness, and emotional intensity, thereby linking linguistic access directly to narrative depth.

## Decolonial Theory and Linguistic Justice

Decolonial theory was principally developed by scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Walter D. Mignolo, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who argued that colonial histories have entrenched Eurocentric knowledge systems and languages as dominant, marginalising indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing (Bhola, 1987; Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2015). The theory posits that language and knowledge production are sites of power, and privileging colonial languages, such as English, reproduces epistemic injustice, disconnecting knowledge from local cultural, social, and emotional realities (Müller, 2021).

Decolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining the dominance of English in knowledge production and the marginalisation of indigenous languages. Scholars have argued that colonial histories have entrenched Eurocentric epistemologies and languages as the standard for legitimate knowledge, resulting in what has been described as epistemic injustice or epistemicide (Bhola, 1987; de Sousa Santos, 2015). Language, in this context, is a site of power where certain ways of knowing are privileged while others are rendered invisible.

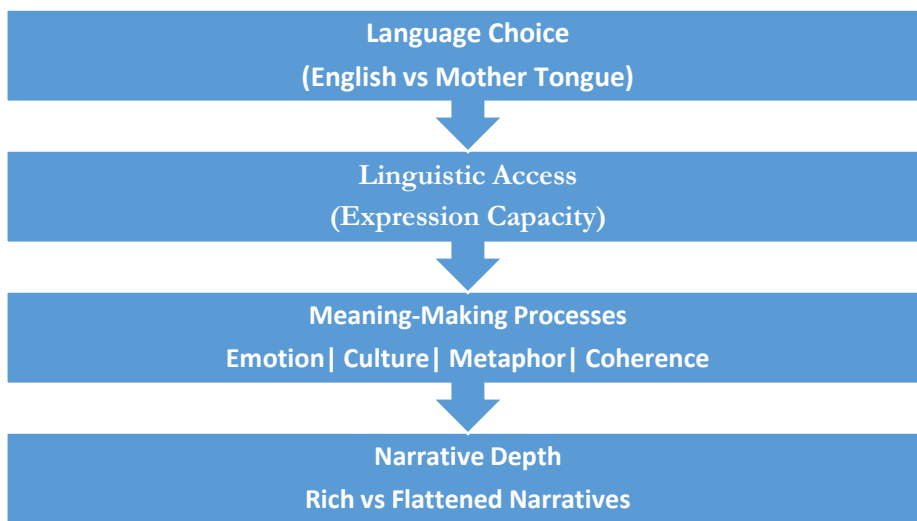
Bhola (1987) contends that language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture, memory, and worldview. The continued privileging of colonial languages in research reproduces forms of symbolic violence by disconnecting knowledge from the lived realities of marginalised communities. In multilingual societies such as South Africa, English dominance in qualitative research reflects institutional and historical power relations rather than methodological necessity (Heugh, 2013).

While decolonial scholarship has powerfully critiqued linguistic domination at the level of knowledge systems, it has paid comparatively little attention to its implications for qualitative narrative construction. This study extends decolonial theory by demonstrating how language exclusion operates at the micro level of research interaction, shaping what can be said, felt, and known within qualitative interviews.

Taken together, interpretivist epistemology, sociolinguistic theory, and decolonial thought provide a foundation for understanding how language shapes meaning, identity, emotion, and power. Despite calls for rich, in-depth qualitative narratives, scholars rarely theorise how narrative depth is constrained when participants are required to respond in English. This linguistic exclusion is often normalised, even though most participants in multilingual contexts are not native English speakers. By synthesising these theories, this study frames language exclusion as a structural constraint on meaning-making and narrative construction. This theoretical lens underpins the development of the study's language-mediated conceptual model of narrative depth, presented below in Figure 1.

The conceptual framework developed in this study builds on interpretivist epistemology, sociolinguistic theory, and decolonial thought to explain how language mediates narrative depth in qualitative research. While these theoretical perspectives illuminate how meaning, identity, emotion, and power are shaped by language (Schwandt, 2014; Bourdieu, 1991), they do not offer a model for understanding how narrative richness is constrained when participants are required to communicate in a dominant language such as English. To address this gap, the study proposes the Language-Mediated Model of Narrative Depth, which identifies four interconnected components: language choice, linguistic access, meaning-making processes, and narrative depth. Language choice, particularly the imposition of English in multilingual contexts, directly shapes participants' linguistic access, limiting their capacity to convey cultural nuance, metaphorical expression, and emotional intensity (Pavlenko, 2005; Van Nes et al., 2010). Linguistic access, in turn, structures meaning-making processes, including emotional resonance, cultural embedding, metaphorical articulation, and narrative coherence, which collectively determine the richness and authenticity of qualitative narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Labov, 1972; Hymes, 1974).

This framework not only explains how English-only practices flatten or distort participant accounts but also provides a practical lens for research design, analysis, and evaluation (Squires, 2009). By foregrounding linguistic inclusion as central to qualitative inquiry, it guided the selection, coding, and analysis of studies in this research, enabling a systematic assessment of how language exclusion impacts narrative depth. The model positions narrative depth as a linguistically mediated outcome rather than a neutral methodological ideal, advancing both theory and practice. It offers a novel contribution to qualitative research methodology, decolonial discourse, and epistemology by demonstrating that authentic, emotionally resonant, and culturally coherent narratives are contingent upon participants' ability to respond in their mother tongue, thereby providing a pathway for more ethically grounded and socially responsive knowledge production (Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2015).



**Figure 1:** *Language Mediated Model of Narrative Depth*

Figure 1 illustrates the language-mediated model of narrative depth developed in this study. The model demonstrates how language choice at the point of data collection functions as a structural condition that shapes linguistic access, meaning-making processes, and ultimately narrative depth. When participants are required to respond in English rather than their mother tongue, linguistic access is constrained, limiting emotional expression, cultural nuance, metaphorical articulation, and narrative coherence. These constraints result in flattened or superficial narratives, despite the use of qualitative methods. Conversely, mother-tongue inclusion expands linguistic access, enabling deeper meaning-making and richer narrative construction.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach situated within an interpretivist paradigm, premised on the assumption that meaning is socially constructed through language and context rather than discovered as an objective reality (Schwandt, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A descriptive and analytical research design was employed, drawing exclusively on secondary qualitative data to critically examine how language choice is addressed or neglected within existing qualitative scholarship (Bryman, 2016). The population comprised published qualitative studies conducted in multilingual contexts between 2015 and 2025, across various social science disciplines, where interviews or focus groups constituted the primary data collection methods. Using purposive sampling, thirty studies were selected based on their reliance on narrative data and their explicit or implicit treatment of language use, a strategy widely endorsed for theoretically driven qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). Data were collected through systematic document review, after which studies were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns relating to language choice, narrative depth, and meaning making (Braun & Clarke, 2006), alongside critical discourse analysis to interrogate how English dominance and linguistic exclusion shaped knowledge production and interpretive authority (Fairclough, 2013). This dual-analytic strategy enabled both surface-level thematic comparison and deeper examination of power relations embedded in methodological decisions, consistent with decolonial critiques of qualitative research practices (McDonnough, 2025). The methodological choices were guided by the study's language-mediated conceptual framework, ensuring analytic coherence between epistemological assumptions, theoretical positioning, and empirical evaluation.

### The Hegemony of English and the Absence of Linguistic Reflexivity

The analysis reveals that English functions as a hegemonic methodological default in qualitative research conducted in multilingual contexts (Nemouchi & Holmes 2022; Singh, 2017; Couper, 2025). This finding is widely corroborated in methodological literature (Squires, 2009; Van Nes et al., 2010). In the majority of reviewed studies, English was adopted without explicit justification, reflecting what has been described as the “invisibility of language” in qualitative research design (Esposito, 2001; Dafouz & Smit, 2020). Creswell and Poth (2018) note that qualitative researchers frequently acknowledge the importance of participant voice while simultaneously neglecting the linguistic conditions under which that voice is produced. This contradiction was evident across the sampled studies, where narrative depth was claimed but language choice remained unexamined.

Critics of multilingual qualitative research argue that English serves as a practical lingua franca that enables consistency, comparability, and dissemination of findings (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson & Deeg, 2010; Regmi, Naidoo

& Pilkington, 2010; Navarro, 2022). However, the evidence from the reviewed studies suggests that this pragmatism comes at a high epistemic cost. Interpretivist scholars contend that meaning is inseparable from the language through which it is constructed (Schwandt, 2014; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Acharya, 2025), a position that directly challenges the assumption that English can function as a neutral conduit for meaning. The findings, therefore, expose a theoretical inconsistency: while qualitative research is grounded in interpretivist assumptions, its linguistic practices often contradict those assumptions by privileging efficiency over meaning-making.

## **2. Emotional Expression, Affect, and the Limits of Second-Language Narration**

A dominant finding across the reviewed studies was the systematic attenuation of emotional expression when participants were required to respond in English (Flores, 2020; Palm, Elliott, McKie, Deakin & Anderson, 2011). Narratives collected in English frequently lacked affective depth, relying on abstract or generic descriptors, a pattern extensively documented in bilingualism research (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010). Pavlenko (2005) demonstrates that emotional experiences are encoded and retrieved more vividly in one's first language, while second-language expression often results in emotional distancing. This linguistic phenomenon was evident in the reviewed studies, where participants' accounts appeared emotionally restrained despite addressing profoundly personal or traumatic experiences.

Some scholars argue that emotional restraint in English may enhance analytical clarity by reducing emotional bias (Keysar, Hayakawa & An, 2012). However, critics counter that such distancing undermines the very purpose of qualitative inquiry, which seeks to understand lived experience in its emotional and contextual fullness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin, 2018). The findings align with the latter position, indicating that emotional flattening is not a methodological advantage but a distortion of participant meaning. Studies incorporating mother-tongue responses consistently demonstrated richer affective expression, supporting sociolinguistic claims that emotion, memory, and language are deeply intertwined (Bourdieu, 1991; Pavlenko, 2012; Sapir, 2024; Whorf, 2012; Eckert, 2019). Thus, from this evidence, it can be deduced that English-only qualitative research systematically limits affective meaning-making, producing narratives that are analytically coherent yet emotionally impoverished.

## **3. Cultural Nuance, Metaphor, and the Epistemic Loss of Translation**

The findings further indicate that English dominance leads to a significant erosion of cultural nuance and metaphorical meaning, a concern long raised by sociolinguists and anthropologists (Hymes, 2013; Clifford & Marcus, 2023). In English-only studies, culturally embedded idioms, proverbs, and symbolic expressions were either omitted or translated into simplified explanatory language, resulting in what Geertz (1973) describes as "thin description." This pattern mirrors Esposito's (2001) observation that translation often prioritises semantic equivalence over cultural meaning, thereby stripping narratives of their interpretive depth.

Defenders of English-language research argue that careful translation and back-translation can mitigate meaning loss (Brislin, 1970; Klotz, Swider & Kwon, 2023). Yet the reviewed studies rarely employed such rigorous procedures, and even when they did, scholars acknowledge that metaphorical and symbolic meanings are often untranslatable (Schwandt, 2014). Decolonial theorists go further, arguing that translation itself may constitute epistemic violence by forcing indigenous meanings into Western linguistic frameworks (Bhola, 1987; de Sousa Santos, 2015). The findings support this critique, showing that studies allowing indigenous languages preserved culturally situated meanings that English-only studies could not capture (Molokomme, 2025). It can therefore be inferred that language exclusion produces not merely partial data but structurally altered knowledge.

## **4. Narrative Coherence, Meaning-Making, and Methodological Misattribution**

Another key finding concerns narrative coherence and temporal organisation. English-dominated studies frequently reported fragmented narratives, hesitations, and truncated responses, which researchers often interpreted as indicative of participants' experiences or reflexive capacities (Altidor, 2020; Quist, 2025; Spangler, 2015). However, narrative theory suggests that coherence is linguistically and culturally patterned rather than inherent (Labov, 1972; Riessman, 2008). Studies permitting mother-tongue narration consistently demonstrated stronger narrative arcs, clearer causal sequencing, and richer evaluative framing.

Methodological critics argue that fragmented narratives may reflect genuine experiential fragmentation, particularly in contexts of trauma or marginalisation (Riessman, 2008). While this is plausible, the comparative evidence across studies suggests that linguistic constraint plays a significant role in narrative fragmentation. Schwandt (2014) cautions that researchers frequently misattribute linguistic difficulty to participant cognition or experience, thereby misinterpreting data. The findings support this caution, indicating that narrative incoherence is often an artefact of language exclusion rather than a substantive finding (Vivienne, 2016). From an interpretivist

standpoint, this misattribution undermines validity by conflating methodological limitation with empirical reality (Schwandt, 2014).

## 5. Language, Power, and the Coloniality of Qualitative Knowledge

The findings reveal that language exclusion is embedded within broader structures of power, reinforcing what decolonial scholars describe as the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Despite operating in postcolonial contexts, few studies critically engaged with the political implications of privileging English. Language choice was justified primarily through pragmatic concerns, cost, time, or publication requirements, reflecting institutional norms that prioritise efficiency over epistemic justice (de Sousa Santos, 2015).

Some scholars contend that English facilitates global knowledge circulation and scholarly legitimacy (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Kuteeva, 2023). However, critics argue that this global accessibility is achieved by marginalising local epistemologies and voices (Bhola, 1987). The reviewed studies overwhelmingly supported the latter position, demonstrating that English dominance shapes not only data quality but also whose knowledge is legitimised. The findings, therefore, position language exclusion as a systemic epistemological constraint, rather than an individual methodological choice.

Synthesising these findings, it becomes evident that language exclusion operates as a structural determinant of narrative depth. Across emotional expression, cultural meaning, narrative coherence, and epistemic authority, English-only qualitative research consistently produced flattened and constrained accounts (Yeom, 2024). While de Sousa Santos (2015) defends English dominance on pragmatic grounds, the cumulative evidence suggests that such pragmatism conflicts with the epistemological commitments of qualitative inquiry. The findings, therefore, substantiate the study's central argument: narrative depth is a linguistically mediated outcome, and excluding participants' mother tongues systematically restricts meaning-making processes in qualitative research.

The cumulative patterns identified across the reviewed studies are systematically synthesised in Table 1 below, which maps empirical observations onto competing scholarly positions and the deductions advanced by this study. As illustrated, the dominance of English as a methodological default consistently coincides with diminished linguistic reflexivity, reduced emotional intensity, loss of cultural nuance, and weakened narrative coherence, despite scholars' rhetorical commitments to narrative depth. The table further demonstrates that while some researchers defend English on pragmatic or dissemination grounds (e.g., Van Nes et al., 2010; Regmi et al., 2010), a substantial body of interpretivist, sociolinguistic, and decolonial scholarship provides converging evidence that language choice fundamentally shapes meaning-making processes (Schwandt, 2014; Pavlenko, 2005; Bhola, 1987). Importantly, Table 1 makes visible the theoretical silence that this study addresses. Although narrative depth is widely invoked as a qualitative ideal, the matrix shows that it is rarely theorised as a linguistically mediated outcome. Instead, narrative thinness is often misattributed to participant experience rather than to methodological constraint. By juxtaposing dominant assumptions with critical scholarship, Table 1 substantiates the study's central deduction: language exclusion operates as a structural determinant of narrative depth rather than a peripheral methodological issue. The matrix, therefore, functions not merely as a summary of findings but as an evidentiary bridge between theory, analysis, and the study's proposed language-mediated conceptual model of narrative depth.

**Table 1: Evidence Matrix Linking Language Choice to Narrative Depth in Qualitative Research**

Theme	Empirical Pattern Identified in Reviewed Studies	Supporting Scholars / Evidence	Contrasting or Critical Views	Deduction / Contribution of This Study
English as Methodological Default	English was adopted without reflexive justification in most multilingual qualitative studies	Squires (2009); Esposito (2001); Creswell & Poth (2016)	English is defended as a pragmatic lingua franca, enabling comparability and dissemination (Van Nes et al., 2010; Regmi et al., 2010)	English dominance reflects epistemic normalisation rather than neutrality; language choice is treated as logistical, contradicting interpretivist assumptions
Lack of Linguistic Reflexivity	Minimal discussion of how language choice shapes meaning or depth	Schwandt (2014); Bryman (2016)	Language is viewed as secondary to method design (Regmi et al., 2010)	Absence of reflexivity constitutes a theoretical gap, not a methodological oversight

Emotional Flattening in English Narratives	Reduced affect, cautious emotional expression, and generic descriptors	Pavlenko (2005; 2012); Dewaele (2010); Bourdieu (1991)	Emotional distance is argued to improve analytical reasoning (Keysar et al., 2012)	Emotional restraint is an epistemic loss in qualitative inquiry; affect is central to meaning-making
Enhanced Emotional Intensity in Mother Tongue	Rich emotional vocabulary and embodied expression are used when indigenous languages are used	Pavlenko (2005); Bourdieu (1991); Denzin & Lincoln (2011)	Translation risks emotional distortion (Van Nes et al., 2010)	Emotional depth is linguistically mediated; mother tongue enables fuller affective meaning
Loss of Cultural Nuance and Metaphor	Idioms, proverbs, and symbolic expressions are omitted or diluted in English	Hymes (2013); Geertz (1973); Esposito (2001)	Back-translation proposed as a solution (Brislin, 1970)	Cultural meaning cannot be fully translated; exclusion produces epistemic loss
Preservation of Cultural Meaning in Indigenous Languages	Strong cultural embedding and contextual richness	Labov (1972); Riessman (2008); de Sousa Santos (2015)	Cultural specificity is seen as limiting generalisability (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007)	Generalisability achieved through exclusion undermines authenticity and validity
Fragmented Narratives in English	Disjointed responses, weak narrative arcs	Schwandt (2014)	Fragmentation attributed to participant experience (Riessman, 2008)	Narrative incoherence often results from linguistic constraint, not lived experience
Narrative Coherence in Mother Tongue	Clear sequencing, causal explanations, evaluative framing	Labov (1972); Creswell & Poth (2016)	Multilingual analysis is seen as methodologically complex (Regmi et al., 2010)	Coherence emerges from linguistic access, confirming interpretivist meaning-making
Language and Power	English legitimised through institutional and publication norms	Bhola (1987); Mignolo (2011); Quijano (2007)	English facilitates global scholarly communication (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007)	Language exclusion reproduces coloniality of knowledge
Institutional Reinforcement of English Dominance	Ethics boards and funding structures discourage multilingual methods	de Sousa Santos (2015); Mignolo (2011)	Cost-efficiency prioritised over inclusivity	Language exclusion is systemic, not individual researcher choice
Overall Impact on Narrative Depth	English-only studies yield superficial, flattened accounts	Pavlenko (2005); Schwandt (2014)	Depth is treated as stylistic rather than structural	Narrative depth is a linguistically mediated outcome
Theoretical Silence on Narrative Depth	Narrative depth invoked but not theorised	Riessman (2008); Creswell & Poth (2016)	Depth is assumed to emerge naturally	This study theorises narrative depth as structurally constrained by language

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical implications for qualitative research, particularly concerning the construction of narrative depth. By synthesising interpretivist epistemology, sociolinguistic theory, and decolonial thought, the study demonstrates that language is not a neutral conduit for meaning but a structural determinant of narrative richness (Schwandt, 2014; Pavlenko, 2005). The evidence from the reviewed studies shows that English-only research consistently produces flattened affect, fragmented narratives, and diminished cultural nuance (Riessman, 2008; Hymes, 1974). This confirms sociolinguistic claims that emotion, metaphor, and embodied expression are deeply tied to mother-tongue use (Bourdieu, 1991; Pavlenko, 2012) and aligns with decolonial arguments that privileging English perpetuates epistemic inequities (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Consequently, narrative depth cannot be treated as a methodological ideal or stylistic outcome; it is a linguistically

mediated property of qualitative data that emerges only when participants can respond in the language in which they experience and interpret their worlds. Ignoring this constraint risks producing knowledge that is both epistemically and ethically compromised.

Methodologically and practically, these findings underscore the urgent need for reflexive and inclusive language planning in qualitative research. Ethics review boards, funding agencies, and academic institutions should explicitly recognise that language exclusion constrains narrative coherence and meaning making (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Van Nes et al., 2010). Training in qualitative methods should incorporate modules on multilingual interviewing, translation strategies, and reflexive linguistic design, highlighting the trade-offs between pragmatism and epistemic depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Moreover, the study challenges researchers to reconceptualise translation not merely as a technical step, but as an epistemological act that shapes interpretation and validity (Geertz, 1973; Esposito, 2001). By foregrounding these implications, the study positions narrative depth as an outcome contingent on linguistic justice and structural inclusivity, rather than as an abstract qualitative aspiration. In doing so, it provides a robust foundation for both the theoretical advancement of qualitative methodology and the practical enhancement of data richness in multilingual research contexts.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has critically examined how language exclusion shapes the depth and quality of qualitative narratives in multilingual contexts. The findings reveal that requiring participants to respond in English systematically constrains emotional expression, cultural nuance, metaphorical richness, and narrative coherence, resulting in narratives that are superficially coherent but limited in interpretive depth. By integrating insights from interpretivist epistemology, sociolinguistic theory, and decolonial thought, the study positions narrative depth as a linguistically mediated outcome, highlighting that language choice is central to meaning making rather than a peripheral methodological concern.

The study further demonstrates that English dominance in qualitative research is both normalized and institutionally reinforced, often at the expense of authentic participant voice. Enabling participants to respond in their mother tongue enhances narrative richness, preserves cultural and emotional meaning, and strengthens the overall quality and validity of qualitative findings. These conclusions underline the necessity of recognising linguistic inclusion as a fundamental component of ethical and robust qualitative research design.

The study highlights the necessity of institutional support for multilingual research practices. Academic institutions, funding agencies, and ethics review boards should prioritise the inclusion of mother-tongue responses in qualitative studies. This involves allocating sufficient resources for translation, transcription, and training, as well as developing clear guidelines for multilingual research design. By institutionalising such support, researchers can ensure that participants are empowered to express themselves fully in the language in which they think and feel, enhancing the richness, coherence, and authenticity of qualitative narratives.

Training for qualitative researchers should incorporate deliberate linguistic planning. Researchers must be equipped with skills in multilingual interviewing, reflexive translation, and culturally sensitive transcription to capture the emotional and metaphorical depth of participants' narratives. Planning for language inclusion should be embedded from the design stage rather than treated as an afterthought, ensuring that language does not become a structural constraint on meaning-making. This approach promotes methodological rigor and ethical practice by acknowledging participants' linguistic realities.

The study also underscores the importance of reflexivity in language choice. Researchers are encouraged to actively consider how their own language preferences and institutional norms may shape data collection and interpretation. Reflexive practices should involve not only selecting the appropriate language for interviews but also reflecting on how translation and transcription decisions may influence narrative coherence, emotional intensity, and cultural nuance. Such reflexivity ensures that qualitative research captures lived experiences authentically rather than producing flattened or distorted accounts.

In terms of limitations, this study relied exclusively on secondary data, which restricts the ability to directly observe participant experiences or test interventions for linguistic inclusion. The findings are therefore interpretive and based on patterns reported in published studies, which may reflect the biases and methodological constraints of the original researchers. Nonetheless, this approach provides a comprehensive overview of trends in language use across multiple studies and highlights systemic issues that warrant attention.

For future research, scholars are encouraged to explore the relationship between language choice and narrative depth using primary data in multilingual contexts. Longitudinal and comparative studies could investigate how mother-tongue inclusion influences not only the richness of narratives but also the interpretive decisions of researchers over time. Additionally, research could examine the practical implications of multilingual methodologies, including cost, training, and institutional support, to provide guidance for implementing language-conscious research designs in diverse contexts.

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