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AI in Language Learning and Multilingual Classrooms

Bridging Tongues with Technology

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Opening Reflection

Language is more than vocabulary. It is identity, connection and culture. In South Africa's multilingual classrooms, language learning is both a challenge and a gift. Artificial Intelligence now offers new tools to support translation, pronunciation and personalised practice. But can machines honour the nuance of isiXhosa idioms or the rhythm of Afrikaans poetry? And how do we ensure that AI enhances, rather than flattens, linguistic diversity?

What's Happening Now

- Apps like Google Translate and Grammarly are being used informally by learners to navigate multilingual tasks.
- AI-powered language platforms such as Duolingo and Speakly are gaining traction in urban schools, especially for English and Afrikaans support.
- Teachers in the Eastern Cape are experimenting with AI voice tools to help learners improve pronunciation in isiXhosa and English.
- Concerns are rising about over-reliance on translation tools, especially in language-rich subjects like literature and history.

What's Changed: From Memorisation to Meaningful Dialogue

Before AI:

Language learning relied on rote exercises, dictionaries and classroom repetition.

Now:

AI offers instant feedback, adaptive practice and cross-language support. Learners can hear, speak and translate in real time.

Key Shift:

From static memorisation to dynamic interaction. From one-size-fits-all to personalised multilingual scaffolding.

Why It Matters

South Africa's linguistic landscape is complex and beautiful. AI can support inclusive language learning, especially in under-resourced schools. But it must be guided by educators who understand the cultural weight of words. Language is not just a skill, it is a way of being.

Reflective Responses

What does responsible AI use in language learning look like?

It means using tools to support, not replace, human interaction. It means honouring idiomatic richness and cultural context.

How can educators integrate AI without losing linguistic depth?

By combining AI tools with oral storytelling, peer dialogue and contextual analysis.

What support do schools need?

- Training in multilingual AI tools
- Policies on ethical translation use
- Resources for indigenous language integration
- Community partnerships to preserve linguistic heritage

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from Eastern Cape pilot projects (2025):

- Voice tools improved learner confidence in oral English tasks
- Teachers reported better engagement when AI was used alongside traditional methods
- Concerns remain about AI's limitations in capturing cultural nuance

“Language is not just spoken, it is felt, remembered and lived.” – Johan Pretorius, rural school principal in the Karoo
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