



Exploring language barriers in teaching Setswana Home Language in Multicultural classrooms

Moroa Selina Malebo¹ , Bridgette Mangwegape¹  & Pule Phindane¹ 

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Language Department, Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The study aimed to examine the linguistic obstacles that affect the effective teaching and learning of Setswana Home language (HL) in South African schools. The interpretivist research paradigm was employed because it is considered subjective centered on social interaction and individual interpretation. Participants were determined using a purposive sampling strategy, and data were obtained through interviews. The sample consisted of 6 Setswana home language teachers and 24 learners. Atlas-Ti version 23 was employed to analyse the interview transcripts. To identify patterns and themes in the data, thematic analysis was applied. Research findings revealed that learners' cultural heritage, psycho-social variables, parental encouragement and discipline were significant factors that contributed to the motivation of learners to strive tirelessly and enjoy learning, and that both teachers and learners perceive Setswana HL as a fundamental component of their cultural legacy and identity. The challenges that were highlighted have a direct effect on teaching and learning because they contribute to psycho-social issues, inadequate performance in class activities, and time consumption. As a result, the study recommends parental involvement to encourage learner academic achievement and essential professional development to promote a positive mindset toward teaching and learning of Setswana HL. The Department of Education will obtain knowledge gained from the study to implement effective strategies in various areas where educators require empowerment to enhance achievement, and also to ensure that amendments of policies are relevant to the needs of learners. Each district will achieve high performance, which will establish the province as a leader in the field.

Keywords: Language barriers, Setswana Home Language, Multicultural Classrooms, Teacher Development, and Educational Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a country with a vast diversity in terms of language, culture, religious groupings, ethnicity and race. These diversities are mirrored in the environments of teaching and learning. To enhance the intellectual growth of learners, the home language is taught in elementary schools during the first four years of education (Grades R, 1, 2, and 3). From Grade 4, English is used as the main medium of classroom instruction and teaching of Setswana home language in multilingual classrooms has proven to be a challenging task for teachers and learners in Mangaung Metropolitan Education

CORRESPONDENCE – Moroa Selina Malebo Email: selina.malebo@gmail.com

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District (MMED) of the Free State province in South Africa, at times these diversities pose a challenge to teachers more.¹ The geographic region is situated in the heart of the capital city and is surrounded by a variety of languages, including the dominant Sesotho and the Lesotho country, which is close to the Free State province. Given the proximity of the neighbouring provinces, other languages recognized include isiXhosa and isiZulu. Multilingual classroom environments often intensify language-learning barriers, especially where learners have limited prior exposure to the instructional home language.² These barriers frequently manifest themselves through poor reading fluency, weak phonics, limited vocabulary, and the difficulty in constructing grammatically sound sentences.³ Despite the centrality of home language in supporting cognitive development and academic achievement, multilingual learners often struggle to access meaningfully Setswana HL content due to mismatches between their linguistic repertoires and classroom expectations.⁴ Contemporary literature focuses considerably on inclusive education,⁵ overcrowding,⁶ discipline,⁷ and literacy development,⁸ yet limited empirical work interrogates the specific language barriers faced when teaching Setswana HL in culturally diverse primary school settings like those in the province of the Free State of South Africa. This presents a gap in scholarly knowledge, particularly concerning how such barriers shape teaching practices, learner engagement, and overall academic performance in the Free State's multilingual contexts. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by exploring the language-related challenges encountered by Setswana HL teachers in multicultural classrooms.

The objective of the study is to examine the linguistic obstacles affecting the effective teaching and learning of Setswana HL. It is one of the objectives of the study to identify strategies that teachers adopt to navigate these challenges. The research is guided by qualitative approaches to research underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm and the school of phenomenological thought. This design allowed a deep understanding of experiences of the participants within their multicultural classroom contexts. The article proceeds by discussing: (1) theoretical and policy perspectives on home-language instruction; (2) teacher and learner attitudes toward Setswana HL; (3) key challenges encountered in multilingual classrooms; and (4) strategies available to enhance Setswana HL teaching and learning. The article concludes by highlighting implications for practice and recommendations to improve language support in diverse educational settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The cultural and linguistic origins of learners whose family members are immigrants continue to be a challenge for global education systems. According to Babane, political upheaval, better living conditions, economic difficulties, or improved educational opportunities are the main causes of

¹ Rosemary Wildsmith-Cromarty and Robert J Balfour, "Language Learning and Teaching in South African Primary Schools," *Language Teaching* 52, no. 3 (2019): 296–317.

² Rockie Sibanda, "'I'm Not a Teacher': A Case of (Dys) Functional Parent-Teacher Partnerships in a South African Township," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2021); Hedyana Putra and Lenny Marzulina, "Teaching Reading Comprehension by Using Content-Based Instruction (CBI) Method to the Second Years Learners at MTs Al-Furqon Prabumulih," *Edukasi: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran* 2, no. 2 (2015): 185–98..

³ Masello Phajane, "Languages of Learning and Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Educational Use of the African Languages," *Journal for the Education of Gifted Young Scientists* 10, no. 1 (March 30, 2022): 47–62, <https://doi.org/10.17478/jegys.1057028>; Sheldon F Shaeffer, "Mother Tongue and Early Childhood Care and Education: Synergies and Challenges.," *UNESCO Bangkok*, 2020.

⁴ Mega Lestari and Achmad Yudi Wahyudin, "Language Learning Strategies of Undergraduate EFL Students," *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning* 1, no. 1 (2020): 25–30; Nishantha Rohan Nethsinghe, "The Notion of Authenticity in Multicultural Music: Approaching Proximal Simulation," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 15, no. 2 (August 29, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v15i2.551>.

⁵ Tiina Kivirand et al., "Designing and Implementing an In-Service Training Course for School Teams on Inclusive Education: Reflections from Participants," *Education Sciences* 11, no. 4 (April 2, 2021): 166, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11040166>.

⁶ Joyce West and Corinne Meier, "Overcrowded Classrooms – The Achilles Heel of South African Education?," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (April 30, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.617>.

⁷ Olufunmilayo Tenidade Obadire and Dzivhonele Albert Sinthumule, "Learner Discipline in the Post-Corporal Punishment Era: What an Experience!," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (May 31, 2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n2a1862>.

⁸ Valerie Karr, Anne Hayes, and Samuel Hayford, "Inclusion of Children with Learning Difficulties in Literacy and Numeracy in Ghana: A Literature Review," *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 69, no. 5 (2022): 1522–36.

migration.⁹ Teachers cannot effectively nurture their learners' cognitive or basic communicative abilities in the language they teach if they lack a high degree of linguistic confidence in it.¹⁰ Kozikoglu asserts that a learner's home environment has a major influence on their learning and development, among its elements are cultural background, social standing, parental support, and financial status.¹¹ In South African's primary schools factors that interact to influence the learners' learning are the location of the small townships, the parents' work prospects, the learners' home language and by addressing these socio-cultural and home environment effects, teachers can recognize the complex factors influencing learner learning, develop specialized support strategies to overcome these barriers, and foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments because these components are frequently challenging for non-mother tongue speakers, who have trouble understanding the subtleties of verb conjugations, sentence structure, and meanings. This presents a problem for teachers who need to figure out how to explain these laws to learners who do not have the fundamental knowledge of Setswana HL. A major obstacle to language acquisition is the difference between the linguistic backgrounds of learners and the criteria needed for the acquisition of these principles.¹² Keumal, et al. agree that initiatives such as parent-teacher collaborations, resource allocation, and culturally responsive teaching methods can minimize the impact of sociocultural and home environment barriers, and can also foster a more encouraging and inclusive learning environment.¹³ Research on the experiences of young learners in today's diverse and linguistically first-language classrooms is still lacking; the objective of this study is to address this research gap.

Children become more confident of their ability to express themselves intelligibly in their mother tongue when they start school. Through observations and interactions with peers and adults in their society, they have developed a foundation of understanding and expertise.¹⁴ This indicates that their language acquisition, wisdom, and everyday interactions provide a valuable foundation that supports their classroom education. Similar sentiments were reported by Kuppensa & Langer.¹⁵ They highlighted that Kenyan teachers appear to place greater emphasis on the value of fostering unity than acknowledging and appreciating diversity in the classroom; as a result, numerous learners are left behind because they cannot learn the language they do not understand.

Song demonstrated that the lack of clarity in New Zealand's early childhood curriculum regarding how to cater for people of different backgrounds beyond Pasifika and Māori affects Chinese home language learners in Aotearoa, New Zealand, to encounter difficulties with language acquisition.¹⁶ This is a clear indication that teachers in multilingual settings experience similar challenges worldwide. However, teachers and learners understand that sociocultural barriers and underprivileged origins can pose major challenges to learning, which even successful teaching methods might not be sufficient to completely overcome.¹⁷ Socio-cultural elements and the family surroundings have an essential effect on influencing learners' educational experiences and outcomes. In Botswana, the National Commission on Education specifies that Setswana must be the predominant language of instruction for the first four

⁹ Vusiwana C Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

¹⁰ Masello Phajane, "Languages of Learning and Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Educational Use of the African Languages," *Journal for the Education of Gifted Young Scientists* 10, no. 1 (March 30, 2022): 47–62, <https://doi.org/10.17478/jegys.1057028>.

¹¹ Ishak Kozikoglu and Mecit Aslan, "Socio-Cultural, Psychological and Academic Problems of Undergraduate Syrian Students in Turkey," *Issues in Educational Research* 28, no. 3 (2018): 701–19.

¹² Refa Lina Tiawati et al., "Cultural Literacy in Indonesian Language Learning for Foreign Speakers (BIPA): Overcoming Barriers and Fostering Language Proficiency with Cross-Cultural Understanding Issues," *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Research* 4, no. 1 (2024): 22–31.

¹³ M. Keumala, N. M. Samad, and I. A. Samad, "The Influence of Socio Cultural and Educational Background on EFL Learners' Motivation.," *Indonesian TESOL Journal* 1, no. 1 (2019): 67-77.

¹⁴ Moira Maguire and Brid Delahunt, "Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars.," *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2017).

¹⁵ Line Kuppensa, Sulley Ibrahim, and Arnim Langer, "Unity over Diversity? Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Multicultural Education in Kenya," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 50, no. 5 (2020): 693–712.

¹⁶ H. H. Song, "The Challenges and Benefits of Maintaining ECE Children's Home Languages in New Zealand" (Auckland University of Technology, 2020).

¹⁷ Keumala, Samad, and Samad, "The Influence of Socio Cultural and Educational Background on EFL Learners' Motivation."

years of primary school, with the switch to English occurring in the intermediate phase.¹⁸ Their concept involves allocating more time in the school schedule for Setswana HL to ensure that learners have a solid foundation and achieve comprehensive proficiency. The regular teaching and learning process is directly impacted by multilingual setting challenges that South African teachers in MMED continue to encounter. Overcrowding, inadequate teaching resources, workload, departmental pressure to submit administrative work, and lack of professional assistance are further contributing issues.¹⁹

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Phenomenology design has been applied for acquiring a knowledge of the foundation of an experienced challenge. It helps to emphasize, examine and understand the core of human encounters and the significance that individuals attach to them.

Study sample and population

Purposive sampling was used to generate or sample participants. According to De Vos, et al. there are two types of sampling procedures used in research: probability sampling and non-probability sampling.²⁰ Purposive sampling is a non-probability methodology employed in this study to select participants or materials with the most characteristic, representative, or typical traits to best suit the study's objective. The study used the interpretivist paradigm, which views individuals as participants in the research process, and a qualitative research approach to gather data in three schools from MMED in the Free State province. The township is 63km from the city, and is a combination of urban and rural settlements. Data were collected from 24 learners from identified schools and a sample of six Setswana teachers. The selection of teachers and learners is focused exclusively on the reality that they face significant learning challenges daily, which negatively affects academic achievement.

Data collection procedure and analysis

Individual interviews were conducted with teachers while learners participated in focus groups. The six procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke were followed to conduct a thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The findings were visualized using Atlas.ti.

Ethical considerations

The study followed ethical research principles to ensure the safety of the participants. The Department of Education approved the study, which followed standard educational research protocols. Teacher participants received informed consent documents that outline the study's objective, data collection techniques, rights, and confidentiality measures. Parents and learners were informed of the study and provided with consent forms to participate. All data collection techniques guarantee participant anonymity.

¹⁸ Mompoloki M. Bagwasi and Tracey Costley, "A Defiance of Language Policy: Seamless Boundaries between Languages in Botswana Classrooms," *Journal of the British Academy* 10s4 (2022): 125–40, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010s4.125>.

¹⁹ Mohammadreza Valizadeh, "The Effect of Reading Strategies Instruction on EFL Learners' Reading Performances," *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 9, no. S1-May (May 10, 2021): 74–80, <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v9iS1-May.4002>.

²⁰ A.S. De Vos et al., *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed. (Pretoria: Van Schalk, 2011).

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile



Figure 1: Mangaung Metropolitan Education District

Table 1 : Teachers from School 1

Eight learners from the school took part in the group interview. It included seven Setswana HL speakers and one Sesotho HL speaker.

School 1	Teacher A:	Teacher B:	Teacher C:
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Home Language	Setswana	Setswana	Setswana
Have teaching credentials with Setswana as a specialism.	Yes	No (SGB post without qualification)	Yes
Current grade teaching	Grade 5	Grade 4 & 5	Grade 6 & 7
Years of Experience	3 years	4 years	32 years

Table 2: Teachers from School 2

Four Setswana HL speakers and four Sesotho HL speakers were among the eight learners interviewed in a group setting at school 2.

School 2	Teacher A:	Teacher B:
Gender	Male	Female
Home Language	Setswana	Setswana
Have teaching credentials with Setswana as a specialism	Yes	No (Foundation phase qualification with Sesotho as a specialization subject)

Current grade teaching	Grade 6&7	Grade 4 &5
Years of Experience	8 years	2 years

Table 3: Teachers from School 3.

Five Setswana HL speakers, two Sesotho HL speakers, and one IsiXhosa HL speaker were among the eight learners interviewed in school 3.

School 3	
Gender	Teacher A: Female
Home Language	Setswana
Have teaching credentials with Setswana as a specialism	Yes
Current grade teaching	Grade 4-7
Years of Experience	15 years

Table 4: Challenges of teaching Setswana Home language in multilingual setting.

Themes	Sub-themes
Challenges in Learning Setswana HL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language Structure and Conventions • Reading and Writing Difficulties • Limited Understanding and Application • Socio-cultural Factors and Home Background
Challenges in Teaching Setswana HL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited Resources & Support • Teacher Shortages & Lack of an Expertise
Impact of Challenges on Learning and Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor class performance & low marks • Psycho-social problems • Time-consuming & Frustration

The challenges of learning Setswana HL in a linguistically diverse environment were identified by learners as language structure and conventions, reading and writing difficulties, limited knowledge and application, socio-cultural variables, and home background. Grammar complications made it more difficult for learners to comprehend complex text, communicate effectively, and prosper academically. The findings also discovered that sociocultural and background aspects influence learners' education.

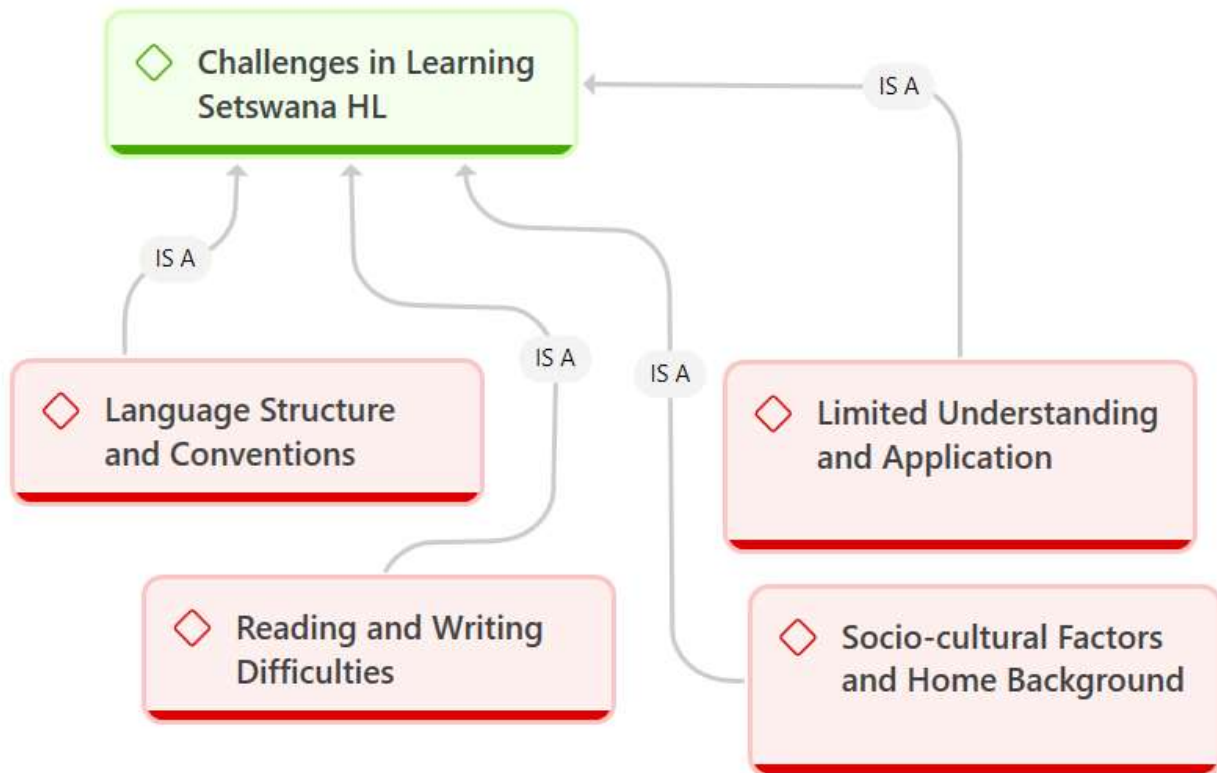


Figure 2: Theme 1 and sub-themes: Challenges in Learning Setswana HL
Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas. Ti

Language Structure and Conventions

The basic principles and patterns that govern the Setswana language, known as language structure and conventions (LSC), are difficult for learners to understand. LSC covers spelling, sentence structure, parts of speech, verb conjugation, and prepositions.

Learner 01 (School 1) explained, "I have a few challenges in Language structure and conventions, such as verbs, prepositions, and parts of speech." This quotation demonstrates how learners struggle with areas of LSC. It might be difficult for learners who struggle with verb conjugation to switch between verb forms to express person, mood, or tense. They have trouble using the appropriate prepositions to convey time, place, or direction. It can be challenging for those who have trouble with parts of speech to recognize and employ the proper noun, verb, adjective, and adverbial word types.

According to Listia & Febriyanti, language competency is important for academic achievement, and learners with linguistic problems struggle to connect phrases in a paragraph, affecting their writing ability.²¹ Sentences with erroneous grammatical patterns may result in miscommunication and meaninglessness of information, which is a significant contributor to inadequate performance in the findings. Mastering LSC is critical to good communication, reading, and writing skills.

Further findings revealed that learners have challenges with grammar: "I struggle with verb conjugation and sentence structure (Learner 03, School 1)". Communication that is ambiguous or confusing can result from learners having difficulty constructing coherent phrases. Additionally, they battle with spelling. For instance, Learner 05 states that they have trouble with spelling, which can have an impact on their writing abilities and general self-assurance while using the language: "I have never failed, but I struggle with spelling" (Learner 05, School 2). Grammar is essential for learners to comprehend what is given, as it permits learners to understand the language's content. In addition, it

²¹ Rina Listia and Emma Rosana Febriyanti, "EFL Learners' Problems in Using Tenses: An Insight for Grammar Teaching," *IJET (Indonesian Journal of English Teaching)* 9, no. 1 (July 28, 2020): 86–95, <https://doi.org/10.15642/ijet2.2020.9.1.86-95>.

helps learners articulate effectively. Learners who struggle with grammar may find it more difficult to communicate clearly, understand difficult texts, and thrive in both their personal and academic lives.

Grammar is "the backbone of any language," as stated by John Munro.²² An implication that proficiency in grammar is linked to fluency, sentence structure, and effective communication in both native and foreign languages. Learners need to understand grammar because it makes it easier for them to grasp the content of the language. Additionally, it makes it possible for learners to compose essays well. Grammar errors can make it harder for learners to communicate clearly, comprehend difficult content, and succeed in both their personal and educational endeavours.

Reading and Writing Difficulties

When reading and writing in Setswana HL, learners face difficulties with spelling, pronunciation, and fluency. Learner 02 (School 1) had trouble reading fluently and had to use a Setswana dictionary, whereas Learner 06 (School 1) had challenges in spelling and pronouncing words correctly. Learner 04 (School 1) struggled to express themselves in words, saying, *"I find it hard to write essays in Setswana because I don't know how to express myself."* Learner 07 (School 2) failed Setswana HL in term 1, struggling to read and answer questions, despite understanding the lesson – *"failed Setswana last year in term 1, it was challenging for me to read and answer in Setswana HL. I could hear and understand the lesson, but it was difficult to write proper words, (Learner 07, Sch2)"*. In School 3, Learner 08 struggled with narrative formation and flow, frequently responding in Sesotho, whereas Learner 06 initially failed due to difficulties with switching codes, particularly in writing. – *"I have never failed Setswana HL, but I got 50%, which is average. I always struggle with forming our own stories, ... I struggle with the flow of ideas because Setswana words are difficult to understand, sometimes I even answer in Sesotho (Learner 08, Sch3)"*.

Their teachers ascribed these challenges to learners coming from different provinces - "Our learners are different... learners from different provinces such as Eastern Cape and their home language is different from ours (Teacher C, School 1)."

According to the findings, learners encounter challenges in acquiring fundamental literacy skills, which may impair their ability to interact with written materials and communicate in writing. For non-mother-tongue speakers, reading and writing in Setswana can be difficult because they are frequently not exposed to the language outside of the school. Their ability to acquire strong literacy abilities is hampered by this restricted exposure, which makes it difficult for them to comprehend texts and write coherently.²³ To aid learners in improving their reading comprehension and writing skills in their native tongue, teachers must frequently offer additional support and resources, which can be time-consuming and resource-intensive.²⁴ Furthermore, findings suggest that the performance of learners in school and their drive may be greatly impacted by their inability to read and write Setswana HL, underscoring the need for specialized assistance and resources to solve these issues. In accordance with Adams, inadequate reading abilities have been linked with poor mental health and low self-esteem.²⁵ 11-year-old readers with literacy challenges have been found to demonstrate less resilience due to setbacks, quit up frequently, and have lower self-confidence in their ability to succeed. In addition to emphasizing the significance of reading literacy, Sebole et al. argued that to ensure an effortless transition to the application of a second language, which is also relevant to the learner's overall academic performance, it is extremely important that learners achieve a certain level of academic language proficiency in their

²² John Munro, "Learning Grammar Is Just as Important as It Always Was but the Way We Teach It Has Changed.," 2023.

²³ M. Basson, "A Professional Development Enquiry: Teacher Pedagogical Content Knowledge to Support Reading Comprehension of Non-Mother-Tongue Speakers" (Stellenbosch University, 2016).

²⁴ Fatima Saidani and Ghaniya Boukhemacha, "The Effects of Extensive Reading on EFL Learners' Writing Skills" (Université Ibn Khaldoun-Tiaret, 2020).

²⁵ Robert John Adams, "Improving Health Outcomes with Better Patient Understanding and Education," *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, 2010, 61–72.

native Setswana.²⁶ In this way, learners can enhance their comprehension and writing skills, which will benefit other learning areas.

Limited Application and Understanding

The findings revealed that learners struggle to recognize and use the proper word types, which causes confusion and blunders. Understanding and application refer to the difficulties learners encounter when understanding and applying various Setswana HL concepts, including parts of speech (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). *"I struggle mostly with parts of speech. I always mix them up (Learner 07, School 1)"*. Learner also struggles with reading fluently and confidently, and with effective oral communication and presentation: *"I struggle to read fluently and in oral presentations (Learner 08, School 1)"*, some learners find it difficult to comprehend idioms and figurative language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, similes): which can limit their comprehension of complex texts and conversations: *"I don't understand some of the concepts in Setswana HL, like idioms and figurative language (Learner 05, School 1)"*.

Furthermore, Barends & Reddy stated that understanding a variety of skills, such as decoding, fluency, vocabulary, sentence construction, reasoning, background knowledge, working memory, and attention, is essential for reading comprehension, which is a difficult skill that is exacerbated by language.²⁷ Teachers and learners must strive to overcome the difficulties that arise in the classroom. It is also the obligation of learners, with the support of parents, to participate in additional classes on weekends, morning or afternoon sessions, to equip themselves with the necessary information.

The findings revealed that learners experienced difficulties in understanding and using Setswana HL concepts, which can hinder their capacity for critical thought and fluent language proficiency. Learners who excel at communicating have an advantage, particularly in career advancement. Strong communication skills foster leadership, teamwork, and the ability to influence peers' opinions. Incorporating teamwork and collaboration into the curriculum is crucial because it allows learners to develop their communication skills and work together to succeed. Previous research has shown that children must first achieve academic language competency in their mother tongue before trying to learn or employ a second language.²⁸ It is vital to succeed in learning and mastering a second language. Nyarigoti and Ambiyi agree that learners who cannot speak Setswana as their mother tongue may have an inadequate grasp of the language, limiting their ability to apply it in a variety of circumstances.²⁹ This includes recognizing subtle meanings, colloquial idioms, and cultural references inherent in the language.

Socio-Cultural And Home Environment Influences on Learning

Responses from learners and teachers highlight the importance of socio-cultural elements and home background in influencing learning and progress. Learner 01 (School 2) distressingly highlighted the profound impact of socio-cultural factors and home background on learner learning, stating that a significant number of learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds, grappling with socio-cultural challenges that severely hinder their learning progress. Learners with limited resources, a lack of parental support, and socio-economic instability struggle to interact with learning materials and achieve academically. Despite teachers' efforts to implement successful tactics, these learners need immediate support and interventions to overcome socio-cultural and home environment barriers to learning.

²⁶ Lesedi L Sebole, Katijah Khoza-Shangase, and Munyane Mophosho, "The Reading Comprehension of Grade 5 Setswana-Speaking Learners in Rural Schools in South Africa: Does Home Language Matter?," *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning= Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 35, no. 3 (2019): 59–73.

²⁷ Zelda Barends and Chris Reddy, "Moving beyond a Balanced Approach to Reading Instruction – In Search of a Contextualised Alternative," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (May 21, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/SAJCE.v14i1.1528>.

²⁸ Katherine Nelson, "The Role of Language in Infant Development," in *Psychological Development from Infancy* (Routledge, 2017), 307–37.

²⁹ Naomi Nyarigoti and Sarah Ambiyi, "Mother Tongue in Instruction: The Role of Attitude in the Implementation," *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2014): 77–87.

“Most learners come from a poor background, and socio-cultural issues are contributing factors to barriers to learning. Even the teacher’s strategies are not helping. Those struggling learners need urgent support. ... am worried about some of my friends, they lack concentration, which leads to poor performance (Learner 01, school 2)”.

Keumala et al. assert that learners and teachers acknowledge that socio-cultural obstacles and underprivileged origins can provide substantial impediments to learning, which may not be entirely mitigated by good teaching practices.³⁰ Socio-cultural components and the residential environment significantly influence learners' educational experiences and results.

With the clarification, *“Our school is based in a rural township location and most of the parents are from Lesotho, they are in South Africa for employment, and they look after livestock,”* Teacher A (School 2) gave important background information. *Most of our learners speak Sesotho.* Therefore, a language barrier in the classroom is caused by the backgrounds of the learners. This realization emphasizes how crucial it is to consider the distinct sociocultural and language backgrounds of learners in this situation.

“Although I’m not sure of the precise reason, I firmly believe that home background plays a significant role in shaping learner learning outcomes,” said Teacher A (School 1), acknowledging the impact of the home environment. A learner's educational journey is shaped by their home environment, which lays the groundwork for future achievements or setbacks. Learner learning and advancement are influenced by several interrelated factors, including parental participation, socioeconomic position, and resource accessibility.

Kozikoglu maintains that the home environment has a substantial impact on the education and growth of learners.³¹ Subsequently, it encompasses factors such as parental support, resources, social level, and cultural background. In this instance, the home language of learners, the geographical setting of the rural township, the parents' professions and means of subsistence in South Africa all interconnect to influence the progress of the learners.

By addressing the socio-cultural and home settings effects, teachers may acquire an improved comprehension of the complex factors influencing learning and develop individualized support approaches to overcome these barriers and foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments. This includes programs that reduce the impact of sociocultural and home environment barriers while promoting a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, such as parent-teacher collaborations, resource allocation, and culturally responsive teaching approaches.³²

³⁰ Keumala, Samad, and Samad, “The Influence of Socio Cultural and Educational Background on EFL Learners’ Motivation.”

³¹ Kozikoglu and Aslan, “Socio-Cultural, Psychological and Academic Problems of Undergraduate Syrian Students in Turkey.”

³² Keumala, Samad, and Samad, “The Influence of Socio Cultural and Educational Background on EFL Learners’ Motivation.”

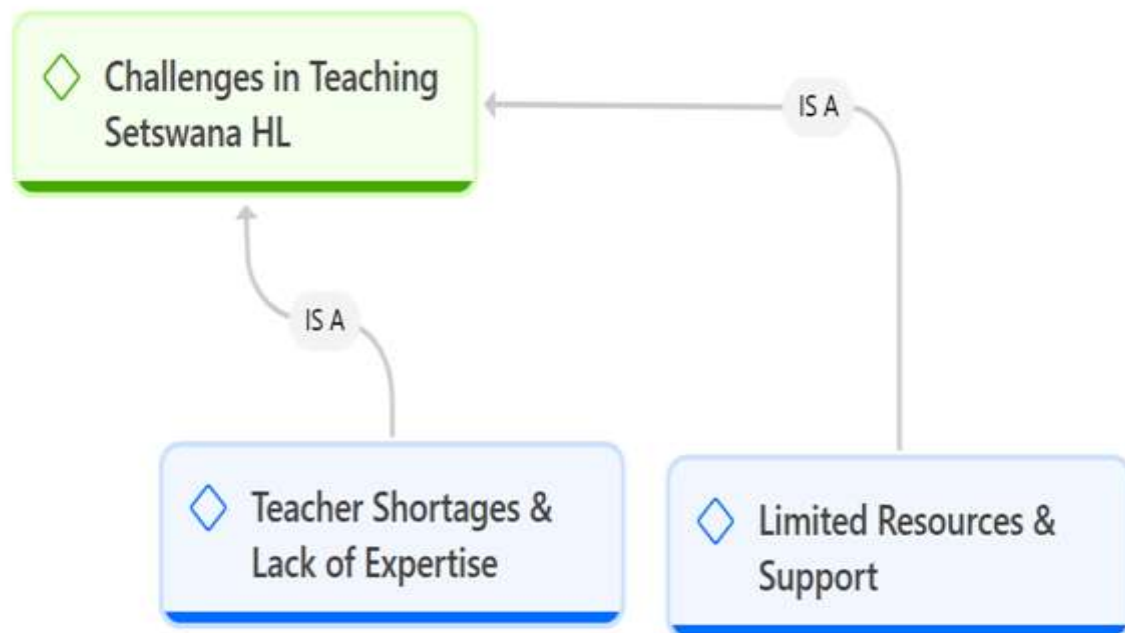


Figure 3: Theme 2 and sub-themes: Challenges in Teaching Setswana HL
Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas. Ti

Limited resources and support

The findings revealed that teachers struggle in multilingual classrooms because they have limited resources and consequently are unable to assist learners in developing their confidence, intelligence, optimism, problem-solving skills, and creative thinking. They have stated that learners have trouble understanding what they read, which suggests that they want specialized training and assistance. They suggested that some learners lack the fundamental skills required to write. Teacher A (School 1) stipulated, *"I experience many challenges, learners do not read with understanding... Some learners are completely not able to write..."*. Teachers also highlighted the difficulties of parental support and support for foreign learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Lesotho and Zimbabwe: Teacher B (School 1) mentioned, *"We also have foreign learners in our school, especially Lesotho and Zimbabwe... Lack of parental support and learners."* Teachers emphasized the importance of parental engagement and support in motivating and advancing learners.

Furthermore, a significant number of South African teachers continue to struggle with language instruction, which directly affects the teaching and learning process everyday. Other contributing factors include overcrowding and inadequate instructional materials, which delay curriculum coverage and harm the final assessment because the curriculum was not covered due to limited resources, workload, departmental workload, and lack of professional support.³³

Hansen-Thomas et al. expressed similar perspectives, suggesting that inadequate resources, including textbooks, instructional materials, and qualified teachers skilled in language acquisition, can impede efficient teaching and learning.³⁴ Lack of access to high-quality teaching resources in their native tongues can cause teachers and learners to become discouraged and argue that the language is not as significant or useful, which can result in lower grades and a negative mindset.

Teacher A, School 1: *"There is insufficient support structure at the school, I've been anticipating Setswana novels for a very long time since I find it difficult to enhance my reading abilities."* *"The lack of Setswana core readers and textbooks is a challenge,"* Teacher C (School 1) remarked. Many authors

³³ Valizadeh, "The Effect of Reading Strategies Instruction on EFL Learners' Reading Performances."

³⁴ Holly Hansen-Thomas et al., "I Do Not Feel I Am Properly Trained to Help Them! Rural Teachers' Perceptions of Challenges and Needs with English-Language Learners," *Professional Development in Education* 42, no. 2 (2016): 308–24.

used to publish books like "Se-Garona" and "Se-Gaetsho," which offered a variety of content; in contrast, the books that are currently available are insufficient.

The findings demonstrate that teachers face major challenges in delivering quality instruction, which can affect the ability of learners to acquire essential skills and knowledge. Lack of supplies and support can result in gaps in learners and their fundamental abilities (reading and writing), making it harder to engage learners from different backgrounds, providing learners fewer opportunities to practice critical thinking and analysis, and causing teachers to become frustrated and burned out.

Lack of experience and teacher shortages

The findings of the research demonstrate that the allocation of the Setswana HL subject is still problematic as teachers are allocated the subject mainly because they perceive the language, rather than having a qualification to teach with Setswana-specific expertise. As Teacher C (School 1) pointed out, "*Some teachers are assigned to teach Setswana HL simply because they belong to the Setswana cultural group, despite specializing in English HL.*" This underscores the prevalent issue of untrained teachers being assigned to teach Setswana HL. Teacher A (School 3) highlighted that there is a shortage of qualified Setswana teachers in schools due to the lack of interest of student teachers in obtaining a teaching credential in Setswana HL. Teacher B (School 1) emphasized that to successfully support learners, Setswana HL necessitates better-qualified teachers. Learners' language competency and cultural awareness are ultimately impacted by the absence of subject matter expertise, pedagogical knowledge, and cultural understanding caused by the shortage of trained Setswana HL teachers. This research highlights the necessity of focused efforts to attract and retain skilled teachers, offer opportunities for professional growth, and create tools and support systems to improve teachers' proficiency in teaching Setswana HL.

In accordance with Deocampo, a teacher must possess a solid body of knowledge to support learners in pursuing lifelong learning.³⁵ Additionally, in the opinion of O'Connor & Geiger, there is a widespread absence of support and training for teachers to aid in the correct application of the language-in-education policy in a multilingual approach to education.³⁶ Teachers' capacity to grow professionally and successfully instruct Setswana HL is hampered by the lack of resources and support systems. In line with what the teachers have stated, learner performance degrades greatly when they encounter an inadequate number of Setswana teachers or when subjects are assigned improperly without Setswana as the primary module.

³⁵ Marilyn Fernandez Deocampo, "Issues and Challenges of English Language Teacher-Trainees' Teaching Practicum Performance: Looking Back and Going Forward," *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network* 13, no. 2 (2020): 486–503.

³⁶ Julie O'Connor and Martha Geiger, "Challenges Facing Primary School Educators of English Second (or Other) Language Learners in the Western Cape," *South African Journal of Education* 29, no. 2 (July 8, 2009): 253–69, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v29n2a167>.

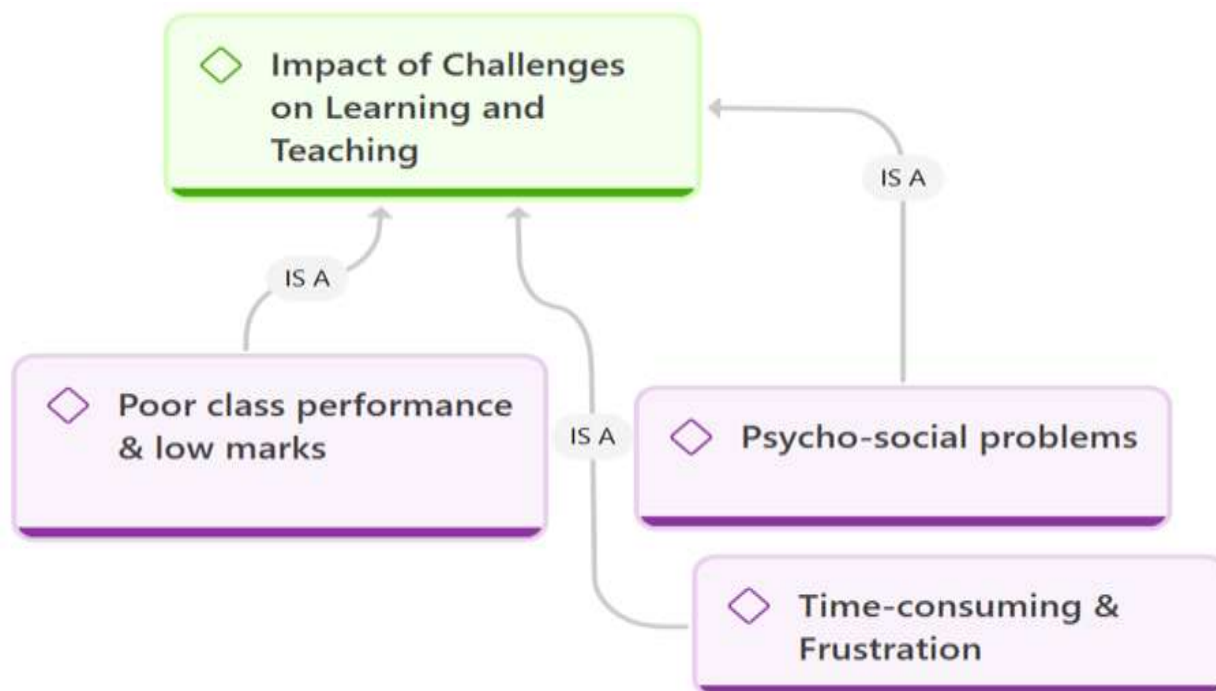


Figure 4: Theme 3 and sub-themes: Impact of Challenges on Learning and Teaching.
Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas. Ti

Poor class performance and low grades

Learning difficulties in Setswana HL contributed to poor academic achievement in class and low grades. The results demonstrated that learners acquire low scores on language questions due to challenges with speaking, writing, and reading (Learner 01, School 1: *"The difficulties I face negatively affect me because they result in low marks"*). Furthermore, learners' entire performance is impacted by their difficulties with comprehension pronunciation, and fluency (Learner 02, School 1: *"It affects my transition to other languages because I am struggling to read other words fluently, therefore reading in another language is somehow affected"*) (Teacher A, School 2: *"learners struggles affect class participation; you can easily identify them through reactions or lack of concentration"*). Teachers frequently note that their challenges have an impact on their overall performance and participation in class. A learner's overall performance is impacted when they receive low marks in particular inquiries on formal assessments (Learner 02, School 2: *"I receive low marks in a specific question during formal assessment, and it affects my overall performance in the subject"*).

Additionally, learners encounter challenges with the flow of ideas in both languages (Learner 08, School 1: *"I was struggling with the flow of ideas in both languages"*) and spelling, which impacts the meaning of sentences (Learner 05, School 2: *"In my essay writing, I always get spelling wrong, and it affects the meaning of a sentence"*).

The Free State Department of Education similarly strives towards improving its pass performance. For example, Mangaung Motheo Education District (MMED) has established the following learner performance targets: Grades 1-3 100% pass percentage with an average of 75%, Grades 4-7 95% pass rate with an average of 70%. An implication that learners in Grades 1-3 should absolutely pass all, while learners in Grades 4-7 must achieve above 95%.³⁷ According to Ndayambaje, et al., inadequate academic performance poses an immense strain on teachers, parents, and the provincial department, in addition to causing learners to be anxious and embarrassed about themselves.³⁸ A clear

³⁷ Lucia Nthooa Lisene, "Instructional Leadership Perspectives and Practices of Heads of Departments for Science in Lesotho Secondary Schools" (University of the Free State, 2024).

³⁸ Jean Bernard Ndayambaje, Etienne Bikorimana, and Florian Nsanganwimana, "Factors Contributing to the Students' Poor Performance in Biology Subject: A Case Study of Ordinary Level in Rural Secondary Schools of Rwamagana District," *GSC Biological and Pharmaceutical Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2021): 249–61.

demonstration that difficulties in learning Setswana HL have a direct impact on the performance of the learners, resulting in low scores. Factors such as insufficient resources, teacher shortages, and lack of knowledge all have a direct impact on poor class performance.

Psycho-social issues

Psycho-social issues such as emotional discomfort, frustration, and a loss of confidence were also brought on in teaching and learning Setswana HL in a multilingual setting. According to the following replies, learners become frustrated when they don't comprehend lessons, which lowers their motivation to study (Learner 03, School 1: "*I feel frustrated when I don't understand the lessons, and it affects my motivation to learn*"). Some learners have trouble reading aloud because they lack confidence and occasionally mispronounce words (Learner 04, School 1: "*I feel like my confidence is sufficient when I read aloud in the classroom, therefore, at times I mispronounce words*"). The value of psychosocial support in schools is demonstrated by the provision of an appropriate and supportive learning environment that prioritizes learners' and teachers' emotional, mental, and social well-being.

The crucial role of psychosocial support is highlighted in schools, which involves creating an adequate and caring learning environment that protects the emotional, mental and social health of both teachers and learners. According to Song, difficulties with the language can result in frustration, anxiety, and an overall absence of trust in a learner's academic ability; this emotional stress can have an impact on a learner's general well-being and lead to negative perspectives toward learning.³⁹ Furthermore, learners who face difficulties with language learning may feel isolated or ashamed, particularly if they believe they are falling behind their peers.⁴⁰

The findings imply that difficulties in learning Setswana HL in a multilingual setting have a wider effect on learners' emotional and social health, resulting in psycho-social issues that may lower their general standard of living.

Time-consuming and frustrating

Teachers in this situation struggle with extensive lessons, failing to submit recording sheets and schedules on time, which leads to frustration (Teacher A, School 1: "*I fail to submit on time as my lessons are always time-consuming and I am not able to complete the curriculum coverage; at times it is frustrating*"). Teaching Setswana HL in a multilingual setting can be time-consuming and frustrating, leading to late submissions and insufficient curriculum coverage. Teacher B, School 1: "*I am always behind with curriculum coverage, and it affects my administrative work, which leads to late submissions*" Teachers often catch up on missed work either in arranged extra classes or the first week of the new term. However, this causes delays in the new work of the term and affects administrative work. "*I am unable to finish the curriculum because it is time-consuming to re-teach and to translate to learners whose Setswana is not their HL, but it is my responsibility to ensure that learners understand the lesson,*" said Teacher B of School 2. A comprehensive curriculum is vital, given that it allows teachers to achieve their intended objectives, foster a healthy learning environment and provide learners with an adequate education.⁴¹ The challenges that teachers face in teaching Setswana HL can lead to an elevated workload, anxiety, and frustration, impacting their well-being and capacity to provide efficient instruction. Good *et al.* concur that teachers coping with challenges frequently encounter a heavier workload and significant discontent.⁴² The necessity of compensating for a lack of resources and time, in addition to providing supplementary support to learners who are struggling, further contributes to their anxiety, which adversely impacts their teaching abilities. The findings demonstrate that as soon

³⁹ Juyoung Song, "Emotions and Language Teacher Identity: Conflicts, Vulnerability, and Transformation," *TESOL Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2016): 631–54.

⁴⁰ Sachiko Terui, "Second Language Learners' Coping Strategy in Conversations with Native Speakers," *Journal of International Students* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2012): 168–83, <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v2i2.530>.

⁴¹ Poongothai Selvarajan, "The Impact of Remedial Teaching on Improving the Competencies of Low Achievers," *International Journal Of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research* 11, no. 1 (2022): 283–87.

⁴² Mary Ellen Good, Sophia Masewicz, and Linda Vogel, "Latino English Language Learners: Bridging Achievement and Cultural Gaps between Schools and Families," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 9, no. 4 (2010): 321–39.

as challenges within the classroom appear readily apparent, they could potentially have a direct effect on human behaviour, learner participation, coping mechanisms, and ultimately, academic performance.

The Department of Education (DoE) has policies that guide and support teachers; however, since policy amendments are relevant to learners' needs, the DoE will acquire information from the study that can be applied to multiple areas where educator empowerment is required to improve academic achievement in Setswana HL. Additionally, each district will produce high academic performance, placing the province or country on the map, and policymakers will be sufficiently prepared to review current educational policies to ensure they are beneficial to learners' education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improvement in Language structure and convention: The department should provide language workbooks that specifically target the LSC, emphasizing grammatical improvement and sentence construction. Addressing challenges through targeted education and practice may assist learners in developing a stronger foundation in Setswana and enhance their overall language ability.

Provision of reading clubs: To improve learners' proficiency in reading and writing, all educational institutions should implement reading clubs and celebrate literacy days in accordance with the academic calendar. Schools must incorporate a working library, and language competitions across schools should be acknowledged as a component of the curriculum to improve proficiency in learning. The school must acknowledge participants after the year to recognize and honour teachers and learners who have dedicated themselves and demonstrated distinction in both academics and various sports.

Supplying of required resources timeously: The Department of Education should provide schools with the resources they need at the end of the term to prepare for the next term. This will save tuition time because teachers and learners will be able to work at the very beginning of the term. The study also proposes that teachers undergo instruction at the beginning of each new term to prepare them to be equipped with the required expertise. Addressing the challenges through focused resource allocation, professional development, and community participation may benefit both teachers and learners, eventually improving language instruction and learner achievement.

Supply of language-learning resources: Language is vital and distinct; learners need to employ language-learning materials to become proficient. The study suggests that schools should provide learners with learning resources such as dictionaries, grammar books, and flashcards to help them read effectively and comprehend. Teachers must use recording or interpretation equipment to help struggling learners comprehend instruction.

Overcoming the challenges through targeted training, repetition, and encouragement can assist learners in strengthening their fundamental skills in Setswana HL and enhance their language competence.

Approaches may include:

Explicit teaching of parts of speech and figurative language.

Guided and independent practice.

Feedback and support for oral presentations and reading fluency.

Fostering critical thinking and analysis through discussions and activities.

Recruitment of qualified subject teachers: The Department of Education must recruit qualified Setswana HL teachers considering that the language is an essential subject that requires specialized knowledge to assist learners in developing basic skills. When a permanent teacher is unfit or on leave for an extended period, the School Governing Body (SGB) must generate sufficient funds to recruit an accredited replacement teacher to guarantee that learners are taught at all times while minimizing the workload on teachers in other learning areas. Unqualified teachers must develop an interest in the subject, considering that they lack sufficient expertise and are unable to preserve the language within the community.

Study Limitations

Some limitations were also identified. Data was collected from three schools in MMED; the study did not include all the nation's schools. Although a minimal number of participants is allowed, given the qualitative nature of the study, more schools representing various regions could have improved the results. The data collected from Setswana HL teachers and learners also addressed the major problems that influence performance, and since teachers report directly to the principals, the data was accurate. However, interviews with principals and SMT (School Management Team), who are additionally responsible for conducting accountability sessions for underperforming results in the districts at the end of each term, could have resulted in further details. Furthermore, the study met its objective as its purpose is to present background data rather than generalizing results to a broader population.

CONCLUSION

The study's objectives were to explore how Setswana HL is taught in multilingual classrooms. Although the study revealed the challenges Setswana HL teachers and learners experience when teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms, its objective was achieved. Language proficiency is vital to achieving academic success; therefore, we need to support and encourage learners to become hard workers. The findings of the study were incredibly intriguing and relevant. It was revealed that teachers have strategies in place that are used to teach Setswana HL in multilingual classrooms. However, the lack of teaching material and the lack of parental support play a significant role in affecting academic performance. With everything considered, Setswana HL should make endeavours to incorporate language development into every component of the curriculum with the objective of ensuring that learners acquire the skills needed to communicate, understand, and critically interact with information in a variety of subject areas.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Ms. Selina Malebo is a dedicated educator, researcher, and PhD candidate at the University of the Free State, with over eight years of teaching experience in language education. She is deeply committed to enhancing literacy development in multilingual classroom contexts. She holds a Bachelor of Education (BEd) in FET specialising in Setswana and English, a Bachelor of Education Honours degree, and a Master of Education from Central University of Technology, Free State. Her academic journey reflects a strong commitment to educational excellence, research, and continuous professional development. Ms Malebo has contributed to scholarly discourse through her published article titled "Exploring Teacher and Learner Perspectives on Poor Performance in Setswana Home Language in Multilingual Classrooms." Her research focuses on the challenges affecting learners’ acquisition of reading and writing literacy in Setswana, with an emphasis on developing practical and contextually relevant strategies to improve learner performance. As an emerging scholar, she is passionate about empowering learners, supporting teachers, and contributing to the advancement of language education and curriculum development in South Africa.

Dr Bridget K. Mangwegape is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Languages and Social Sciences at the Central University of Technology, Free State. She is an accomplished Setswana linguist and educator with over 25 years of teaching experience, including more than a decade at tertiary level. She holds a PhD in African Languages from the University of the Free State, with research focusing on the reflection of Ubuntu in Setswana drama texts. Her scholarly interests include Ubuntu/Botho philosophy, speech acts in African languages, and language pedagogy in higher education. Dr Mangwegape has presented

her work at numerous international conferences and continues to contribute to the advancement of African languages through research, curriculum development, and postgraduate supervision. She is actively involved in institutional and community initiatives that promote Setswana language and culture and serves on professional bodies such as the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). Her work reflects a strong commitment to academic excellence, cultural preservation, and transformative education.

Prof. Pule Phindane (DLitt) is an associate professor of Language Education in the Faculty of Humanities at Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT). Prior to this he was the Head of Department from Language and Social Sciences department at CUT. Before joining higher education, he was a high school-teacher teaching Sesotho and English. His publications are on language education and Indigenous languages. He is currently involved in a project that seeks to address the issues of reading problems Mother tongue languages in Foundation Phase Education. He also serves on the DHET Research Out-puts sub panels for the Evaluation of scholarly books and conference proceedings. He is a member of Editorial Board of Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science indexed at Scholar Google. He is also a category C Rated Researcher.