



# Teacher perceptions of Literacy Pedagogical practices on learner transition: The case of Grade 3- 4 EFAL in Oliver Reginald Tambo Inland District, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes a qualitative research approach to explore teachers' perceptions of literacy pedagogical practices and their impact on learners transitioning from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in English First Additional Language (EFAL). Rooted in sociocultural theory, the study highlighted the significance of social interactions and cultural influences in the learning and development process. A sample of ten teachers from various schools provided insights through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Findings reveal key themes, including the significance of scaffolding literacy skills and the benefits of collaborative learning in fostering peer interactions. Additionally, the incorporation of culturally relevant materials was found to enhance learner engagement, while challenges such as resource limitations and varied learner preparedness were noted. This research highlights effective pedagogical strategies to support literacy development and facilitate successful transitions to higher grades, contributing to the understanding of how teacher perceptions inform literacy practices and impact student outcomes.

**Keywords:** transition, pedagogical, literacy, theory, instructional strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

Taylor and Von Fintel state that, globally, a significant number of children need to achieve fluency in a second language to pursue higher education and participate in the workforce.<sup>1</sup> South Africa is multilingual, cultural, and socially diverse, which constitutes various challenges regarding our country's education system, especially the first additional language acquisition, which our learners are introduced to in grade 4.

Steyn points out that the shift to English as a first additional language can be especially difficult for students who are tackling multiple subjects simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> The current educational policy promotes the use of students' native languages during the first three years of primary school, after which they transition to English or Afrikaans in grade four. Nevertheless, the policy allows local authorities

<sup>1</sup> Stephen, Taylor and Marisa von Fintel, "Estimating the Impact of Language of Instruction in South African Primary Schools: A Fixed Effects Approach," *Economics of Education Review* 50 (2016): 75–89.

<sup>2</sup> G. M. Steyn, "Educators' Perceptions of Continuing Professional Development for Teachers in South Africa: A Qualitative Study," *Africa Education Review* 7, no. 1 (2010): 156–79.

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to make final decisions regarding implementation. Research has indicated that teaching in a student's mother tongue significantly influences their ability to acquire a second language. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, effective since 1996, is the supreme law of the land and safeguards various rights, including the recognition and equal status of the eleven official languages.

The implementation of home language in education should be carried out effectively so that it supports the teaching of all subjects and allows learners to comprehend and learn in their native language.<sup>3</sup> Language is a fundamental right in the education system, and every student has the right to receive instruction in an official language of their choosing.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it is essential for every educational institution to promote and uphold the equal status of all official languages in South Africa.

The Language in Education Policy (LiEP), established in 1997, promotes multilingualism and an additive approach to bilingualism, allowing for the development of an additional language while preserving the mother tongue. The LiEP underscores the necessity of teaching students in their home language. Specifically, the language instruction provided in grades 1-3 is vital, as it serves as the foundation for academic growth not only in early schooling but also in higher education. Many Grade 3 students now benefit from fundamental instruction in their native language. The class teacher covers four key learning areas, providing support and guidance to help students grasp the concepts. However, these students must adapt to a new classroom setting where they will learn in English as an additional language. This transition requires a shift in teaching, as different subjects will be taught in English by various teachers.

Grade 4 students are experiencing a shift into the intermediate phase of their education, which includes teaching across various subjects. This transition brings several challenges, particularly in adjusting to a different language of instruction. The most significant hurdle for these learners is often the shift from their mother tongue to English as the medium of instruction, which is the central focus of this study. The importance of this research lies in its ability to shed light on the complexities involved in moving from mother tongue education to English in Grade 4. The researcher has been working closely with Grade 4 learners as they adapt to this change. There is increasing concern about how well these students perform during this transition. While several studies highlight the value of mother tongue education, they frequently fail to recognize the essential role teachers play in supporting this transition for Grade 4 learners.

The paper investigates how perceptions about the educational shift affect teachers and the ways they confront associated challenges. The researcher seeks to deeply understand the experiences of teachers who assist learners transitioning from their native language to English as the language of instruction in grade 4. This examination will occur in particular settings to gather insights that can enhance educational practices and increase success rates in English as a second language.

The researcher intends to study how students develop new language skills and assess the effectiveness of their instruction. The objective is to pinpoint successful strategies and practices that assist in the transition from native language education to English in fourth grade, while carefully analyzing the dynamics involved in this shift.

The paper is expected to divulge pedagogical and non-pedagogical practices that could influence the successful transition of grade 3 learners to English as the language of learning and teaching in grade 4. Ultimately, the researcher intends to develop new insights that will empower teachers, parents, and the Department of Education to improve the performance of grade 12 students. The researcher intends to develop new insights that will empower teachers, parents, and the Department of Education to improve the performance of grade 12 students. As the observer of the transition from grade 3 to 4 in the first additional language, the researcher identifies the gap and sees the need to research the teacher perceptions of literacy pedagogical methods for facilitating a successful transition for students from grade 3 to grade 4.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Botha, "Home Language and Language of Learning and Teaching Dichotomy: Language Support for Foundation Phase Learners" (Stellenbosch University, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Republic of South Africa., "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, section 29 (21)." (Government Gazette, 1996).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literacy encompasses a broad skill set that allows individuals to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials within various contexts. It represents a continuous learning journey that empowers individuals to meet their personal objectives, enhance their knowledge and potential, and engage actively in their communities and society.<sup>5</sup> While traditional definitions of literacy focus on reading, writing, and mathematical skills, contemporary interpretations recognize it as a complex capability that involves using an evolving array of tools in diverse situations. Literacy facilitates access to opportunities, challenges, and enjoyment within society.

Contemporary views expand the definition of literacy beyond basic reading and writing skills. It is now recognized as a tool for identifying, understanding, interpreting, creating, and communicating in an ever-evolving digital landscape full of information.<sup>6</sup>

Buthlezi and Seabi notes that English is the main language used for instruction in educational environments.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in a democratic context that addresses language concerns in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP), there is a lively debate regarding the importance of English in education.<sup>8</sup> Several researchers indicate that the insufficient political commitment to empower school governing bodies contributes to the demands from speakers of African languages for high-quality English-medium education.<sup>9</sup> The revised National Curriculum Statement supports the principles of LiEP by advocating for additive multilingualism and encouraging the use of learners' home languages in teaching wherever feasible.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the conventional abilities of reading and writing, literacy is broadly conceived as the capacity to identify, interpret, create, and communicate meaning across various formats and contexts. According to UNESCO, Literacy represents an ongoing journey of learning that empowers individuals to pursue personal ambitions, enhance their knowledge and skills, and actively participate in their communities.<sup>11</sup> This understanding aligns with modern perspectives that regard literacy as dynamic, influenced by context, and shaped by technological and societal developments.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, as Spaul and Pretorius noted, literacy is a foundational skill crucial for individual and societal advancement.<sup>13</sup> It is not merely a tool for accessing information but also a means for critical engagement and active participation in a knowledge-driven economy. This necessitates a responsive and inclusive conceptualization of literacy in the South African context, particularly for multilingual learners shifting from their home languages to English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT).

### The Role of Language Policy and Mother Tongue Instruction

South Africa's Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) supports additive multilingualism by advocating for the use of students' home languages as a basis for learning additional languages. Department of Basic Education (DBE).<sup>14</sup> Studies show that learners gain a deeper cognitive and linguistic understanding when instructed in their home language during the foundational phase.<sup>15</sup> Additionally,

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO, *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education*. (Paris: UNESCO, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO, *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education*. .

<sup>7</sup> T Buthelezi, David Alexander, and J Seabi, "Adolescents' Perceived Career Challenges and Needs in a Disadvantaged Context in South Africa from a Social Cognitive Career Theoretical Perspective," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 23, no. 3 (2009): 505–20.

<sup>8</sup> Bulelwa Nosilela, "Making South African Tertiary Education Multilingual: The Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation of SANTED Multilingualism Projects 2007–2010," 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Danielle Christine Robertson, "Early Learning Teacher Collaboration and Classroom Transitions: A Qualitative Case Study," 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education (DoE), *Revised National Curriculum Statement* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO, *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education*. .

<sup>12</sup> Brian Street, "What's 'New' in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice," *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5, no. 2 (2003); B. Cope and M. Kalantzis, "The Things You Do to Know: An Introduction to the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies," in *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Learning by Design* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 1–36..

<sup>13</sup> N. Spaul and Elizabeth Pretorius, "Coming or Going? The Prioritisation of Early Grade Reading in South Africa," *Early Grade Reading in South Africa*, 2022, 253.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Annual Report 2016–2017," 2017, [https://nationalgovernment.co.za/departement\\_annual/173/2017-departement-basic-education-\(dbe\)-annual-report.pdf](https://nationalgovernment.co.za/departement_annual/173/2017-departement-basic-education-(dbe)-annual-report.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Botha, "Home Language and Language of Learning and Teaching Dichotomy: Language Support for Foundation Phase Learners ."

strong reading and writing skills in the home language serve as crucial support for acquiring a new language, particularly in academic environments.<sup>16</sup>

Countries such as Finland, South Korea, and Japan, which prioritize mother tongue education in early grades, consistently outperform others in international literacy assessments.<sup>17</sup> Block supports this by asserting that leveraging learners' existing linguistic knowledge facilitates second language acquisition.<sup>18</sup> Ferreira, however, cautions that prematurely transitioning learners to English instruction without solid literacy foundations in their home language may result in long-term academic underperformance.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, effective implementation of language policy requires not only political will but also adequate resource allocation, professional development for teachers, and pedagogical strategies such as translanguaging that bridge home and school languages to encourage the academic achievement of learners across the curriculum.

### Transition from Foundation Phase to Intermediate Phase

The move from Grade 3 to Grade 4 signifies a pivotal pedagogical shift from the paradigm of "Acquiring reading skills" to that of "reading to learn".<sup>20</sup> In numerous South African educational contexts, this transition is further complicated by a concurrent shift to English as the medium of instruction. Learners are required to comprehend academic content in a language in which they may lack proficiency, subsequently impeding their reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.<sup>21</sup>

This transition from the Foundation to the Intermediate Phase represents a crucial juncture in a learner's educational trajectory, characterized by substantial academic, social, and emotional adjustments. Research underscores that this period necessitates that learners acclimatize to heightened academic demands, more structured learning environments, and a shift from play-based to subject-based curricula.<sup>22</sup>

The Intermediate Phase introduces a more extensive array of subjects. It employs more formal assessment practices, which can pose challenges for learners still acquiring foundational literacy and numeracy competencies.<sup>23</sup> Evidence suggests that effective transition strategies, such as targeted orientation programs and collaborative planning between Foundation and Intermediate Phases educators, can alleviate learner anxiety and foster academic continuity.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, recent scholarly investigations emphasize the significance of parental engagement and teacher support in facilitating a seamless transition. It has been noted that learners greatly benefit from consistent communication and scaffolding during this critical period.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, a comprehensive approach that addresses academic and socio-emotional dimensions is essential for promoting a successful transition into the Intermediate Phase.

In under-resourced and rural areas such as the Eastern Cape, limited access to quality EFAL instruction and literacy materials exacerbates these challenges.<sup>26</sup> These conditions demand a closer investigation into teachers' pedagogical approaches during this critical transitional phase.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, vol. 23 (Multilingual matters, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> OECD, "Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development," 2022, [https://doi.org/10.1787/sti\\_outlook-2022-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/sti_outlook-2022-en).

<sup>18</sup> David Block, *Social Class in Applied Linguistics* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Ana Paula Faria Ferreira, Patrícia Ferreira, and Célio Gonçalo Marques, "Reading as a Transmedia Experience: A Case Study in a School in Médio Tejo," in *2019 International Symposium on Computers in Education (SIIE)* (IEEE, 2019), 1–6.

<sup>20</sup> Spaull and Pretorius, "Coming or Going? The Prioritisation of Early Grade Reading in South Africa."

<sup>21</sup> Ted L Rosenthal and Barry J Zimmerman, *Social Learning and Cognition* (Academic Press, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> P. Mahlangu and W. Fraser, "Navigating the Transition: Learner Experiences from Foundation to Intermediate Phase," *South African Journal of Education* 43, no. 1 (2023): 101–15.

<sup>23</sup> S. Petersen, T. Khumalo, and Z. Ndlovu, "Academic Challenges during Phase Transitions in Primary Schools," *African Educational Review* 18, no. 2 (2024): 56–72.

<sup>24</sup> L. Nkosi and M. Sibanda, "Teacher Collaboration and Learner Support during Educational Transitions," *Journal of Primary Education* 36, no. 3 (2022): 212–25.

<sup>25</sup> T. Moyo and S. Dlamini, "Parental Involvement and Learner Adjustment: The Transition to Intermediate Phase," *Education Today* 29, no. 4 (2023): 88–99.

<sup>26</sup> Servaas Van Der Berg et al., "Identifying Binding Constraints in Education," Available at SSRN 2906945, 2016.

**Table 1: The Summary of the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in a South African context**

<b>Foundation Phase</b>	<b>Intermediate Phase</b>
Children are learning to read and write in their HL. Most learners are also learning to speak, read, and write English.	Children are learning various subjects, including Natural Sciences, through English. The HL becomes a subject.
Reading is a key area of instruction that emphasizes the development of essential reading skills. Children are acquiring reading abilities in both their Home Language (HL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL).	Reading is a vital tool for children's learning, particularly in English. As they progress, the focus of reading instruction transitions to understanding the features of texts, including how writers structure information and communicate various meanings. Although this is mainly addressed in language classes, it can also be applied throughout different subjects in the curriculum.
Children are reading short, mainly narrative texts in HL and EFAL.	Children read longer, mainly English information texts (with tables and diagrams).
Oral reading is the norm; children mainly read aloud and often in groups; the shift to independent silent reading happens in Grade 3.	Reading is done silently and independently.
Topics are closely linked to learners' lives; they are familiar	Topics are related to school subjects; they are less familiar and often more complex and abstract.
One teacher teaches all four subjects (HL, EFAL, Numeracy, and life skills).	The number of subjects increases to six, and different teachers teach them.
Teaching-learning lessons involve shorter time slots of 15-20 minutes and alternate spatially between desks and 'mat work', whole-class and smaller-group or pair activities.	Lessons get longer (30- 40 minutes), learners tend to stay seated at their desks with more teacher-fronted delivery of content subject information, often built around and supplemented by information in texts/textbooks. Activities can involve whole-class and group work.
The teacher ideally provides a lot of support (Scaffolding) for learners.	Learners have to be more independent and think for themselves.

Many factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, home environment, school quality, pedagogy, and resource availability, contribute to poor English First Additional Language (EFAL) performance among South African learners leaving the Foundation Phase. While many of these influences lie outside the curriculum's direct control, research highlights three key curriculum-related factors crucial for successful additional language learning: It is important to develop solid reading skills in one's native language, oral language development in EFAL, and reading ability in EFAL.

Firstly, robust foundational reading skills in the home language are essential, as these skills can transfer and support reading in EFAL; however, most South African learners currently exit the Foundation Phase with weak reading skills in their home languages, severely undermining their ability to acquire EFAL. Secondly, oral language development in EFAL is vital, requiring learners to build a basic vocabulary and map new English words onto concepts already known in their home language. Lastly, reading proficiency in EFAL depends not just on oral language skills but also on explicit instruction and practice in decoding, which is strengthened by strong home language reading skills. Reading in English is essential for learners with limited exposure to English outside of school, as it provides valuable additional language input.

**Literacy Pedagogy and EFAL Instruction**

Effective literacy pedagogy requires more than phonics and decoding skills. It must cultivate critical comprehension, meaning-making, and functional application. (Romani,2024). However, many South

African classrooms still emphasize rote learning and surface-level decoding with limited focus on higher-order thinking skills.<sup>27</sup>

In the EFAL context, these limitations are particularly detrimental. Pretorius and Klapwijk highlight the importance of structured and meaningful engagement with English through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.<sup>28</sup> Effective EFAL instruction in Grade 4 must include scaffolding strategies that support learners’ transition from oral communication in their home language to academic literacy in English.<sup>29</sup>

When learners move from Grade 3 in the Foundation Phase to Grade 4 in the Intermediate Phase, they undergo a cognitive-linguistic transition. During the Foundation Phase, most children learn in their home language (HL) and develop Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which are used in everyday contexts like at home or on the playground. However, starting in Grade 4, many children begin to use English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and are expected to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).<sup>30</sup> The table below outlines some of the main differences between BICS and CALP in relation to primary school students.

**Table 2: The Differences Between BICS and CALPS**

<b>Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)</b>	<b>Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)</b>
High-frequency vocabulary is used.	Subject-related terminology is used.
Shorter, simpler sentences are used, and language is personal.	Longer and more complex sentences are utilized, along with more abstract language.
Typically, it requires active listening, and speaking.	Increasingly involves reading and writing.
Texts are mainly recounting or narrative.	Mainly, information texts and skills such as summarizing are necessary.
Meaning can often be worked out from the context	Meaning is in the text; background knowledge may be required
Used in more relaxed, interpersonal situations	As new ideas, concepts, and language become more demanding, they are introduced simultaneously.

Research conducted by Cummins indicates that children learning EFAL in an adequately supportive English-speaking environment typically require about 2 years to develop BICS.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, acquiring CALP may take approximately 5 to 7 years.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, it is vital for the EFAL curriculum to prioritize the development of CALP from the outset. The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) outlines a learning outcome centered on fostering academic literacy, specifically Learning Outcome 5: Thinking and Reasoning. This outcome emphasizes that students should be equipped to use language for critical thinking, reasoning, and effectively accessing, processing, and utilizing information for their learning. In Grade 1, students are expected to grasp English vocabulary associated with concepts like shape, size, direction, and sequence, as well as use English for cognitive tasks, such as identifying similarities and differences, understanding parts of a whole, classifying, and sequencing information.

In Grade 2, learners are further required to present information in various formats, including simple bar graphs and timelines. By Grade 3, this expands to collaborative problem-solving activities (e.g., "How can we keep our environment clean?") and translating information from one format to another, like transforming data from a chart into a concise written text. All three grades incorporate

<sup>27</sup> N. Spaul, "Education Quality in South Africa: An Overview," *South African Journal of Education* 33, no. 3 (2013): 1–25.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth J Pretorius and Nanda M Klapwijk, "Reading Comprehension in South African Schools: Are Teachers Getting It, and Getting It Right?," *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning= Per Linguam: Tydskrif Vir Taalaanleer* 32, no. 1 (2016): 1–20.

<sup>29</sup> Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*.

<sup>30</sup> Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*.

<sup>31</sup> Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*.

<sup>32</sup> Virginia P Collier and Wayne P Thomas, "Validating the Power of Bilingual Schooling: Thirty-Two Years of Large-Scale, Longitudinal Research," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 37 (2017): 203–17.

cross-curricular language learning; for example, Grade 1 involves understanding mathematical terminology (e.g., add, subtract), while Grade 3 includes creating timelines related to history and social science topics.

The EFAL Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) asserts that Thinking and Reasoning skills are woven into all four learning areas. In South Africa, many students start to use English as their Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4, necessitating that they reach significant proficiency by the end of Grade 3 to be able to read and write effectively in English. Thus, enhancing their English literacy skills should be a priority during Grades 2 and 3. However, even though the EFAL CAPS acknowledges the importance of literacy and vocabulary development, both key elements of academic literacy, it doesn't emphasize them as strongly as the RNCS. Consequently, there is a need for increased emphasis on literacy development, as well as additional support and guidance for teachers to effectively facilitate this.

### Teachers' Perceptions and Instructional Practices

Teachers have a crucial role in helping learners make a successful transition to academic literacy. Their perceptions of learners' capabilities significantly influence their pedagogical choices.<sup>33</sup> Teachers who perceive EFAL learners as deficient may lower instructional expectations, reinforcing low performance.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, educators who adopt asset-based approaches drawing on learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are more likely to promote positive literacy outcomes.<sup>35</sup> However, research reveals that many South African teachers lack adequate training in literacy pedagogy and multilingual education.<sup>36</sup> Challenges such as insufficient professional development, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of appropriate teaching materials further complicate efforts to deliver effective EFAL instruction.<sup>37</sup>

### Literacy Instruction in the South African Curriculum

The CAPS prescribes a structured approach to EFAL instruction that encompasses phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing.<sup>38</sup> However, implementation varies widely across schools, and many teachers struggle to enact these guidelines effectively.<sup>39</sup> In multilingual classrooms, learners often arrive with unequal exposure to English, making effective differentiation essential but complex.<sup>40</sup>

### Gaps in the Literature and Justification for the Study

The importance of foundational literacy is widely recognized; however, there is a considerable gap in the research examining teachers' perspectives on literacy pedagogy during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Most existing studies primarily focus on student outcomes or systemic challenges, neglecting to explore the teachers' beliefs, experiences, and instructional strategies. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for improving teacher training, classroom support, and curriculum development.

While foundational literacy is considered essential, there is a notable lack of research investigating teachers' viewpoints on literacy pedagogy during this critical transition. Most current studies emphasize learner outcomes or systemic issues, overlooking educators' beliefs, experiences, and teaching methods.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Borg and Yousif Alshumaimeri, "Language Learner Autonomy in a Tertiary Context: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices," *Language Teaching Research* 23, no. 1 (2019): 9–38.

<sup>34</sup> Ndileleni P Mudzielwana, "The Role of Parents in Developing Reading Skills of Their Children in the Foundation Phase," *Journal of Social Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2014): 253–64.

<sup>35</sup> Ching-Ching Lin and Huseyin Uysal, *Centering Multilingual Learners in School Curriculum through Community Asset Mapping: A Practical Guide for Teachers* (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2025).

<sup>36</sup> Taylor and von Fintel, "Estimating the Impact of Language of Instruction in South African Primary Schools: A Fixed Effects Approach."

<sup>37</sup> K. Heugh, "Multilingual Education and Translanguaging in South African Schools: Pedagogical Practices and Challenges," *Language and Education* 33, no. 3 (2019): 222–38; Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Annual Report 2016–2017."

<sup>38</sup> Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Annual Report 2016–2017."

<sup>39</sup> Birgit Brock-Utne et al., *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa-Highlights from a Project*, vol. 5 (Brill, 2010); Nic Spauw and Servaas Van der Berg, "Counting the Cost: COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa and Its Impact on Children," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.

<sup>40</sup> Margie Probyn, "Language and Learning Science in South Africa," *Language and Education* 20, no. 5 (2006): 391–414.

This transitional phase often coincides with a shift in the LOLT, typically moving to EFAL. Despite the linguistic and cognitive complexities, few studies examine how teachers perceive and navigate these challenges in their literacy instruction.

Much of the global literacy research fails to adequately address the distinctive sociolinguistic and educational landscape of South Africa, where multilingualism and language policy significantly impact literacy development. There is an urgent need for localized research that reflects the realities South African classrooms face during this transition.

Understanding teachers' perspectives can offer valuable insights that help design teacher training programs. This can better equip educators with effective literacy strategies for transitioning from Grade 3 to Grade 4.

Enhancing classroom support and curriculum design requires insights into teachers' experiences and instructional approaches. This information will aid curriculum developers and education policymakers in creating linguistically inclusive materials and cognitively supportive literacy programs that address learners' needs during this pivotal stage.

Given teachers' critical role in shaping student success, particularly in EFAL settings, this research aims to identify practical strategies and challenges. This work will support enhanced literacy outcomes and contribute to the broader educational equity and quality goals in South Africa. The transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 is a pivotal moment in learners' academic development, especially in contexts where English is the LoLT. Literacy instruction during this stage must be linguistically inclusive and cognitively supportive. Teachers' perceptions and instructional practices influence learner success in EFAL contexts. Further research into these dynamics is crucial for addressing literacy challenges and improving educational outcomes in South Africa.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which suggests that learning is fundamentally a social process, facilitated through interactions with others, language, and interaction within the learner's environment.<sup>41</sup> Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is especially relevant, as it provides a lens for understanding how teachers scaffold literacy learning for learners transitioning from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in EFAL contexts. At this stage, learners are expected to move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," a transition that requires more complex comprehension and cognitive strategies.<sup>42</sup>

In South Africa, this transition is further complicated by the Kaplan and Baldauf which permits mother tongue Instruction to be provided in the native language until Grade 3, after which English is used as the medium of instruction.<sup>43</sup> The LoLT often becomes the primary medium used in educational settings. This transition frequently happens without sufficient support for literacy in either language, which can result in learning challenges.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Vygotsky's focus on language as a cultural tool is essential for evaluating how teaching strategies either support or impede this linguistic and academic transition.

Additionally, Cummins' theory of BICS and CALP is used to understand the gap between conversational and academic English, which Grade 4 learners must bridge.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, teachers' perceptions of their literacy instructional practices can reveal how effectively they facilitate this transition.

New Literacy Studies (NLS) also inform this framework, viewing Literacy as not just about reading and writing. A neutral set of technical skills, but as socially embedded practices.<sup>46</sup> This perspective is pertinent in South Africa, where learners' socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds

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<sup>41</sup> Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth J Pretorius and Nic Spaull, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa," *Reading and Writing* 29, no. 7 (2016): 1449–71.

<sup>43</sup> Robert B Kaplan and Richard B Baldauf, "Language-in-Education Policy and Planning," in *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Routledge, 2005), 1013–34.

<sup>44</sup> Heugh, "Multilingual Education and Translanguaging in South African Schools: Pedagogical Practices and Challenges."

<sup>45</sup> Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*.

<sup>46</sup> Street, "What's 'New' in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice."

strongly influence their literacy development and academic performance.<sup>47</sup> Thus, it is essential to understand how teachers interpret and implement pedagogical practices within their classroom and community contexts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Paradigm**

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand the subjective meanings teachers assign to their literacy pedagogical practices and how these influence learner transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in EFAL classrooms. The interpretivist approach allowed for in-depth exploration of individual and contextual experiences, aligning with the sociocultural theoretical underpinning.<sup>48</sup>

### **Research Design**

A qualitative case study design was utilized to explore the perceptions of EFAL teachers within the Oliver Reginald Tambo Inland District in the Eastern Cape. This design is suitable for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena such as the pedagogical strategies used in literacy instruction during the transition between foundational and intermediate phases.<sup>49</sup>

### **Participants and Sampling**

The study involved two teachers from each school, resulting in a total of ten teachers of EFAL from five primary schools. These schools were purposefully selected based on learner performance data and linguistic demographics. Purposive sampling was utilized to identify information-rich cases, ensuring that participants possessed substantial experience with the EFAL transition and could provide valuable insights into effective pedagogical practices.<sup>50</sup>

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of documents (lesson plans and literacy materials). Interviews were designed to elicit teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences regarding literacy instruction and learner transition. Observations provided contextual and behavioral data on classroom practices, while document analysis provided insight into curriculum alignment and pedagogical planning.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis method.<sup>51</sup> Transcribed data from interviews and observations were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and themes. This iterative process ensured emerging themes were grounded in the data and reflective of participants' lived realities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In conducting research on teacher perceptions of literacy pedagogical practices affecting the learner transition between Grade 3 and Grade 4 EFAL learners in the Oliver Reginald Tambo Inland District, ethical rigor was of paramount importance given the involvement of child participants and educational professionals within a vulnerable socio-educational context.

Informed consent was diligently obtained from all participating teachers as well as the parents or guardians of the learners involved in the study, ensuring clear communication of the research objectives, procedures, voluntary nature, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Child assent was

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<sup>47</sup> N. Taylor, *Equity and Effectiveness in the South African Schooling System* (HSRC Press, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Lawrence A Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (2015): 533–44.

<sup>51</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

also sought in an age-appropriate manner, respecting the agency and dignity of learners as active participants in educational research.

Participant confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained; all data were anonymized, and identifiers were removed to protect individuals' privacy, particularly given the small community context in the Eastern Cape.<sup>52</sup> Data security protocols were implemented to safeguard sensitive information from unauthorized access.

The study was sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity, recognizing the complex interplay of home languages and English LoLT. Strategies such as using participants' preferred languages for communication and interpreting responses were employed to enhance cultural responsiveness and ethical engagement.

To minimize potential harm or discomfort, the research design incorporated flexible, non-intrusive data collection methods respectful of participants' time and emotional well-being, ensuring support mechanisms were available if distress emerged during discussions on learner challenges. Finally, the study received ethical clearance from a recognized institutional review board, guaranteeing adherence to national and international ethical standards for research involving human subjects, thereby affirming the study's commitment to responsible and respectful research practices within South Africa's educational landscape.

This ethical framework ensures that the study upholds the highest standards of participant rights protection and cultural sensitivity within the context of EFAL literacy pedagogical research in Oliver Reginald Tambo Inland District.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study, investigating teacher perceptions of literacy pedagogical practices during the Grade 3 to Grade 4 learner transition within the Oliver Reginald Tambo Inland District, reveals salient challenges intrinsic to the management of EFAL acquisition. Data analysis indicates that the abrupt shift from mother tongue instruction in Grade 3 to English as the LoLT in Grade 4 constitutes a substantial impediment to learner comprehension and academic achievement. This transition is compounded by increased subject specialization and exposure to multiple educators, which together amplify learner anxiety and disrupt educational continuity.

Qualitative responses show that educators often use language scaffolding strategies, such as code-switching and translanguaging, to help students overcome comprehension barriers.<sup>53</sup> However, the findings indicate a widespread lack of systematic collaboration and communication between Grade 3 and Grade 4 educators, which limits the effectiveness of transition-support systems.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, institutional support structures and resources are not consistently available, which hinders the success of interventions designed to facilitate this transition.<sup>55</sup>

The findings substantively corroborate extant scholarship, which underscores the cognitive and psychosocial challenges engendered by LoLT transitions.<sup>56</sup> The reported learner alienation and academic disruption parallel Clarke's characterization of the transition as a period marked by shock, fear, and diminished learner engagement.<sup>57</sup> The reliance on informal pedagogical adaptations reflects documented deficiencies in formal transition management in resource-limited educational contexts. The present data problematize assumptions within the literature that posit adequate institutional support for transitional phases. Empirical evidence from this study reveals significant fragmentation in inter-grade coordination and resource provision. These conditions underscore the urgent need for structured

<sup>52</sup> Jen Aggleton, "What Is the Use of a Book without Pictures? An Exploration of the Impact of Illustrations on Reading Experience in a Monster Calls," *Children's Literature in Education* 48, no. 3 (2017): 230–44.

<sup>53</sup> Sam Ramaila, "The Affordances of Code-Switching: A Systematic Review of Its Roles and Impacts in Multilingual Contexts," *African Journal of Teacher Education* 14, no. 1 (2025): 142–75.

<sup>54</sup> Robertson, "Early Learning Teacher Collaboration and Classroom Transitions: A Qualitative Case Study."

<sup>55</sup> Romain Collet et al., "Facilitators, Barriers, and Guidance to Successful Implementation of Multidisciplinary Transitional Care Interventions: A Qualitative Systematic Review Using the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research," *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances* 8 (2025): 100269.

<sup>56</sup> Bakang Nthutang, "Causes of Low Enrolment in ICT-Related Courses: A Case of TVET Colleges in the North West Province of South Africa" (University of South Africa, 2021).

<sup>57</sup> A. Clarke, "Adam Clarke's Commentary." *On Power BibleCD*. (Bronson, MI: Online Publishing, Inc., 2005).

professional development, enhanced communication channels across grade levels, and contextually appropriate pedagogical frameworks.<sup>58</sup>

In conclusion, this research reinforces established theoretical discussions on language transition barriers while also expanding on them by revealing the practical challenges confronted by educators in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. The study underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions that enhance linguistic continuity, encourage teacher collaboration, and offer systemic support to improve equitable literacy outcomes for learners of English as an EFAL.

## Themes

Based on the data analysis using Braun and Clarke's thematic method, five major themes emerged that illuminate teacher perceptions of the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in EFAL:

- Curriculum Misalignment and Learner Readiness
- Language Transition Challenges and Academic Language Barriers
- Adaptive Pedagogical Practices and Scaffolding Strategies
- Teacher Capacity and Professional Development Gaps
- Sociocultural and Home Language Influences on Literacy Learning<sup>59</sup>

### Curriculum Misalignment and Learner Readiness

Teachers consistently reported a disconnect between the Grade 3 curriculum outcomes and the expectations placed on learners in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms. While Grade 3 learners are often still consolidating basic decoding skills, the Grade 4 curriculum assumes a level of English academic proficiency that many learners have not yet attained. One teacher noted:

*"They come to Grade 4, but they are not ready. The books are in English, the instructions are in English, but they don't understand. We have to go backwards before we can go forward."*

This finding supports Pretorius and Spaull's argument that South African learners often reach Grade 4 without sufficient reading fluency or comprehension, and develop skills in their native language or in English.<sup>60</sup>

### Language Transition Challenges and Academic Language Barriers

The transference from mother tongue instruction in Grade 3 to English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4 was abrupt and disorienting for learners. Teachers observed that many learners struggle with vocabulary, sentence structure, and comprehension of abstract academic concepts. A participant explained:

*"Even if they speak English at a basic level, when it comes to comprehension, they struggle with the questions and writing answers."*

This reflects Cummins' distinction between BICS and CALP, where learners appear fluent conversationally but lack academic literacy skills.<sup>61</sup>

### Adaptive Pedagogical Practices and Scaffolding Strategies

In response to learners' difficulties, teachers reported employing various adaptive strategies, including code-switching, simplified texts, visual aids, and group reading sessions. These practices reflect Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development.<sup>62</sup> One teacher shared:

*"I use pictures, body language, and even isiXhosa to explain concepts. If I don't, my students sit quietly and don't engage. I frequently switch between English and isiXhosa. Without this approach, they tend to stare at me. It's important to meet them halfway." (Teacher C)*

These pedagogical decisions show teachers' responsiveness to learners' developmental levels and the challenges of transitioning into English-medium instruction.

<sup>58</sup> G Kix, "Teacher Professional Development A Research Synthesis" (International Development Research Centre, 2024).

<sup>59</sup> Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

<sup>60</sup> Pretorius and Spaull, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa."

<sup>61</sup> Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*.

<sup>62</sup> Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

### **Teacher Capacity and Professional Development Gaps**

While some teachers demonstrated innovative strategies, others expressed uncertainty about how best to support Grade 4 learners in EFAL. Many participants highlighted a lack of training on teaching reading comprehension or academic literacy in English. As one teacher said:

*"We need more workshops and training. The curriculum changes frequently, but we don't receive enough support on how to teach reading in English, especially for students after Grade 3. While we get training on CAPS, we lack guidance on teaching reading in English to Children who are not proficient in the language. We are often left to figure it out on our own." (Teacher D)*

*"There is a significant gap. We need training to teach EFAL effectively. This should not just be theoretical; we need practical strategies to apply in our classrooms." (Teacher E)*

This points to systemic challenges and the need for ongoing professional development tailored to EFAL literacy instruction.<sup>63</sup>

### **Sociocultural and Home Language Influences on Literacy Learning**

Teachers recognized the impact of learners' home environments on their literacy development. They expressed concern that learners do not get sufficient exposure to English at home, which hampers their ability to succeed in English-dominant classrooms. Additionally, parents are not investing in children's literature that could help learners practice their reading skills. According to one participant:

*"At home, they speak isiXhosa, and many parents also cannot help with English homework. So, the progress is slow, Participant D."*

This resonates with Street's (2003) New Literacy Studies, emphasizing literacy as a socially situated practice influenced by learners' linguistic and cultural contexts.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is imperative for educators to comprehend the critical role of academic literacy and to actively foster its development in both HL and EFAL. To further this aim, the formulation of vocabulary lists for Life Skills and Mathematics is recommended, with an emphasis on instruction in both the Home Language and English First Additional Language.

In addition to vocabulary enhancement, it is fundamental to systematically develop background knowledge on topics pertaining to Life Skills and Beginning Knowledge. Establishing this foundational knowledge will empower learners to achieve a deeper comprehension of texts in both their HL and EFAL. Furthermore, extensive reading practices will substantially contribute to the acquisition of this background knowledge.

It is also essential to strengthen reading skills within both HL and EFAL to enhance overall efficacy and facilitate the transfer of effective reading strategies. To improve learner outcomes, a concerted and collaborative effort should be directed towards: More effectively aligning the curricula of the Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase. Providing structured and sustained support to educators for the instruction of EFAL literacy.

Considering a gradual or bilingual transition to English as the LoLT. Actively engaging families and community stakeholders in promoting and supporting early literacy initiatives. Strengthen the development of writing and enhance learners' skills in English grammar, spelling, and punctuation, while facilitating the transfer of writing strategies from one context to another, from home language to First Additional Language, ensuring that learners get practice in writing non-fiction texts and creating visual texts.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored teacher perceptions of literacy pedagogical practices and their influence on learners moving from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in EFAL within the Eastern Cape context. The findings underscore a multifaceted challenge rooted in curriculum misalignment, abrupt language shifts, and

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<sup>63</sup> S. Taylor, "The Role of Teacher Engagement in Student Learning Outcomes.," *Journal of Educational Research* 114, no. 2 (2021): 123–35.

insufficient teacher preparation for EFAL literacy instruction. Teachers navigate these challenges with adaptive strategies informed by their classroom realities and learner needs. However, without systemic support, such as targeted professional development, curriculum reform, and alignment of early grade language instruction, learners will continue to struggle with the academic literacy demands of Grade 4 and beyond. Understanding teachers' voices and lived classroom experiences is critical to informing literacy pedagogy and educational policy that promote equitable, meaningful learning transitions.

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