



Implications of using English as a language of Learning and Teaching: A case study of a Rural High School in South Africa

Nondwe Daphne Mariana Mtshatsha¹ 

¹ Walter Sisulu University, Faculty of Education.

ABSTRACT

The medium of instruction plays a crucial role in how learners access, engage with, and absorb educational material. In South Africa, the continued use of English as the primary language of instruction, especially in rural areas, raises concerns about its impact on student success and fairness. This case study investigates the educational consequences of using English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in a rural high school in South Africa. Employing a qualitative research methodology grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research purposefully selected six educators and collected data through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that students' limited proficiency in English hinders their understanding, classroom participation, and overall academic success. Factors contributing to this situation include insufficient learning materials and teachers' inadequate proficiency and training in teaching English. Nonetheless, early exposure to English was associated with better academic outcomes across grades. The study suggests progressively introducing English from pre-primary education and calls on the Department of Education to invest in teacher training and student-centred English programmes using accessible media resources. The study concludes that while English presents challenges in under-resourced rural schools, its effective implementation, supported by early introduction, targeted language support programmes, and teacher training in translanguaging, can improve learning outcomes. This paper contributes to scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the implications of using English as the language of learning and teaching in a rural South African context, highlighting the gap between language policy and classroom realities. It advances understanding of how limited English proficiency and teacher preparedness affect learner engagement and achievement.

Keywords: *English Language, Teaching and learning, Academic performance, Rural High School*

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is characterised by its multilingual nature, as outlined in the 1996 Constitution and various language legislation, including the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997. The Constitution recognizes eleven official languages, of which nine are indigenous.¹ Despite this multilingualism, the

¹ Madoda Cekiso, Baba Tshotsho, and Rose Masha, "English Language Proficiency as a Predictor of Academic Achievement among Primary English First Additional Language Learners in South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 9, no. 3 (2015): 325–33.

education system does not effectively implement it, with English often being used for teaching and assessments, regardless of whether it is the home language of the teachers or the students. Milligan, Desai, and Benson highlighted the difficulties that arise when transitioning from home languages to English in educational settings, leading to discomfort for educators and students.² Cunningham emphasised that relegating home languages to 'holiday languages' negatively impacts learners because of their limited proficiency in English.³ Using a home language is crucial as it provides the cognitive and linguistic foundation essential for learning.⁴

Using English as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in rural South African schools presents complex educational and linguistic implications. While English is regarded as a language of global opportunity, its use as the primary medium of instruction in multilingual contexts often alienates learners from their linguistic and cultural realities. In rural high schools with limited access to quality resources, skilled educators, and English-rich environments, the imposition of English as LoLT can contribute to poor academic performance, disengagement, and inequity. Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour argue that South African learners consistently perform below curriculum expectations in national and international literacy assessments, partly due to the mismatch between their home languages and the language of instruction.⁵ International assessments, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), have repeatedly shown that South African learners perform among the lowest globally in reading literacy, especially when tested in English.⁶ The language barrier is particularly pronounced in Grades 8 and 9, where the cognitive demands of academic content increase, but many learners are still acquiring basic English proficiency.

Furthermore, the use of English LoLT has socio-cultural implications. Sibanda and Joubert (2024) argue that privileging English in education reinforces linguistic hierarchies and marginalises African languages. Such marginalisation leads to identity conflict and diminished learner confidence. Saneka and Witt (2019) note that the early transition to English without strong mother-tongue instruction violates learners' linguistic rights and hinders cognitive development. The South African National Curriculum Statement advocates the use of the First Additional Language (FAL) proficiently as a medium of instruction, requiring learners to develop the cognitive academic language proficiency necessary for effective learning across subjects.⁷ In many rural schools, English is the primary language of teaching and learning and is often designated as the FAL. However, concerns persist about teachers' language proficiency. Milligan and Tikly (2016) posit that using English as a medium of instruction presents considerable challenges in under-resourced, postcolonial education systems such as South Africa's. Although English teachers are tasked with equipping learners with essential skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, not all educators demonstrate sufficient proficiency in English to support learners' comprehension and academic engagement effectively.⁸ This challenge is particularly acute when content subjects are taught in learners' FAL, which can limit their ability to grasp complex concepts and articulate their understanding. Consequently, learners may experience academic underperformance. In the Amathole East region of the Eastern Cape, persistently poor matriculation results between 2010 and 2020 raise critical questions about the role of language in shaping educational outcomes.

While English provides access to higher education and employment opportunities, its practical implementation in rural settings requires robust teacher training, resource provision, and a more inclusive language-in-education policy. Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) emphasise the importance of

² Lizzi O Milligan, Zubeida Desai, and Carol Benson, "A Critical Exploration of How Language-of-Instruction Choices Affect Educational Equity," in *Grading Goal Four* (Brill, 2020), 116–34.

³ Clare Cunningham, "When 'Home Languages' Become 'Holiday Languages': Teachers' Discourses about Responsibility for Maintaining Languages beyond English," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 33, no. 3 (2020): 213–27.

⁴ Yusop Boonsuk, "'Teacher, I Don't Know How to Describe 'Tom Yum Kung' in English, but I Know 'Hamburger' and 'Pizza': Will Global Englishes Language Teaching Be a Beacon of Hope or a Recipe for Disaster in Thai ELT?," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 35, no. 2 (2025): 885–98.

⁵ Rosemary Wildsmith-Cromarty and Robert J Balfour, "Language Learning and Teaching in South African Primary Schools," *Language Teaching* 52, no. 3 (2019): 296–317.

⁶ Sarah J Howie et al., "PIRLS 2016: South African Highlights Report" (Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA), 2017).

⁷ Department of Education (DoE), *Revised National Curriculum Statement* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2002).

⁸ Cunningham, "When 'Home Languages' Become 'Holiday Languages': Teachers' Discourses about Responsibility for Maintaining Languages beyond English."

additive bilingualism, where English is taught alongside, rather than at the expense of, learners' home languages, thereby facilitating cognitive and linguistic development. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate whether the use of English as the primary language of instruction, rather than indigenous languages, contributes to the continued low academic achievement of high school learners in this region. The following research question guided the study: What are the educational implications of using English as the language of learning and teaching at a rural high school in South Africa?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In South Africa, primary education from Grades 1 to 3 is offered in learners' home languages, while English is introduced as the medium of instruction (MoI) in Grade 4. Milligan highlights that numerous studies indicate the transition to English MoI has significant implications for children's educational outcomes, especially during this critical phase of primary education.⁹ These studies demonstrate that many students face difficulties in acquiring English language skills and comprehending the curriculum content. The repercussions for academic achievement are evident, including lower learning outcomes, challenges in reading and writing proficiency, higher failure rates, frequent grade repetition, increased dropout rates, and diminished self-esteem among learners.¹⁰ Clegg and Simpson emphasise that most learners have insufficient proficiency in English to engage effectively in listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks.¹¹ Consequently, this lack of language competence hinders their understanding of teacher instructions, impairing their ability to participate actively in classroom activities.

Limited Resources in Learning the English Language

Introducing Grades 8 and 9 in high schools where the MoI is English creates difficulties for teachers and learners, especially in rural areas. Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour report that international evaluations and systemic assessments of language and literacy indicate that most learners in South Africa are seriously underperforming relative to the curriculum and other developing countries.¹² This performance can be attributed, amongst others, to the medium of instruction, English, which is mainly used in the South African education system. Teachers face challenges in and out of the classroom, as learners often struggle to practice the language due to limited teaching and learning resources.¹³ The challenge of limited resources and underqualified teachers exacerbates the problem. In support of the above views, Brock-Utne, Desai, Qorro and Pitman argue that the English medium of instruction is a barrier to engagement with the curriculum.¹⁴

Resource constraints in rural schools exacerbate the challenges posed by English LoLT. Fesi and Mncube found that in poorly resourced environments, learners struggle to develop proficiency in English due to limited access to textbooks, supplementary readers, libraries, and multimedia tools.¹⁵ These limitations hinder language acquisition and literacy development, especially for English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners. Moreover, technological disparities, such as a lack of internet access or computers, prevent learners from engaging with digital English language resources, thereby widening the gap between urban and rural education outcomes.

Compounding the resource deficit is the shortage of qualified English teachers. Many educators in rural areas lack adequate training to teach in English and often lack professional development opportunities to enhance their language teaching strategies. (Shan, 2022). Desai and Brock-Utne et al. highlight that teachers often resort to code-switching or translanguaging as a coping mechanism.¹⁶

⁹ Lizzi O Milligan, "Towards a Social and Epistemic Justice Approach for Exploring the Injustices of English as a Medium of Instruction in Basic Education," *Educational Review* 74, no. 5 (2022): 927–41.

¹⁰ Milligan, Desai, and Benson, "A Critical Exploration of How Language-of-Instruction Choices Affect Educational Equity."

¹¹ John Clegg and John Simpson, "Improving the Effectiveness of English as a Medium of Instruction in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Comparative Education* 52, no. 3 (2016): 359–74.

¹² Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour, "Language Learning and Teaching in South African Primary Schools."

¹³ Liziwe Fesi and Vusumzi Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2021): 1–11.

¹⁴ Birgit Brock-Utne et al., *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa-Highlights from a Project*, vol. 5 (Brill, 2010).

¹⁵ Fesi and Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives."

¹⁶ Zubeida Desai, "Learning through the Medium of English in Multilingual South Africa: Enabling or Disabling Learners from Low Income Contexts?," in *English as a Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial Contexts* (Routledge, 2018), 67–82; Brock-Utne et al., *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa-Highlights from a Project*.

However, without structured training, such strategies may lead to inconsistencies in curriculum delivery and confusion among learners. This is further echoed by Probyn (2015), who notes that even well-meaning attempts at bilingual instruction can falter without clear policy guidelines and pedagogical frameworks.

According to Makhathini and Mngcwango (2020), academic success in a second language depends on a minimum level of proficiency, which many rural learners have not yet attained by the time English becomes the LoLT. Consequently, learners use significant cognitive effort decoding language rather than engaging meaningfully with the content.¹⁷ This often leads to surface learning, rote memorisation, and an inability to engage in the critical thinking skills expected at the high school level. In line with this view, Desai affirms that the language barrier becomes more impenetrable when teachers lack proficiency in the language of instruction, as a result, they resort to code-switching.¹⁸ Teachers have reported that learners do not make academic progress because English is used as the language of instruction.¹⁹ At the high school level, learners are expected to be critical thinkers and problem solvers. However, learners may be unable to do so because teaching and learning are not enhanced and supported through appropriate resources.

The Relationship Between English Language Proficiency and Academic Performance

Studies in Australia by Taylor and Coetzee, and in Canada by Chen, Sakyi, and Cui, reported that linking student, home, and school factors improves learners' reading proficiency in school.²⁰ These studies confirm that learners who had achieved reading proficiency at Level 5 (equivalent to Grade 5) at the age of 10 were 16 times more likely to be enrolled in post-secondary studies at the age of 19 than those who had not reached Level 1 (equivalent to Grade 2). Studies by Grain et al., Collen, and Yokubjonova have reported that in European Union countries, including England, teaching is primarily conducted in the mother tongue.²¹ This pedagogical approach may lead to higher pass rates than in African countries.

Most learners in Southern Africa are taught in English, which is often their second language.²² The author points out that in the Global South, students must either succeed or fail in English instruction, which he views as a form of social injustice. Mkhize and Balfour's opinion is that content subject teachers often overlook teaching the four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.²³ This neglect might contribute to students' insufficient language proficiency. Bowden et al. highlight that learners' and teachers' proficiency in the language of instruction plays a critical role in determining academic success.²⁴

Key Aspects of Assessment Concerning Effective English Reading Skills

Ethiopia's Early Grade Reading Assessment data indicate whether students have acquired essential reading skills for fluency and comprehension. Unfortunately, these results highlighted significant

¹⁷ Cunningham, "When 'Home Languages' Become 'Holiday Languages': Teachers' Discourses about Responsibility for Maintaining Languages beyond English."

¹⁸ Desai, "Learning through the Medium of English in Multilingual South Africa: Enabling or Disabling Learners from Low Income Contexts?"

¹⁹ Kathleen Heugh, "Epistemologies in Multilingual Education: Translanguaging and Genre—Companions in Conversation with Policy and Practice," *Language and Education* 29, no. 3 (2015): 280–85.

²⁰ Sonja Coetzee, "Sustaining Teacher Career Resilience in a Resource-Constrained Rural Education Setting: A Retrospective Study" (University of Pretoria, 2013); Fu Chen, Alfred Sakyi, and Ying Cui, "Linking Student, Home, and School Factors to Reading Achievement: The Mediating Role of Reading Self-Efficacy," *Educational Psychology* 41, no.10 (2021): 1260–79.

²¹ Hayder Mohammed Jawad Salih Grain et al., "Impact of English Language Proficiency, Multilingualism and Perceived Language Difficulties on International Student's Academic Performance in Iraq.," *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2022): 160–70; Ian Collen, "Language Trends England 2023: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England," 2023; D Yokubjonova, "Exploring the Impact of Social Backgrounds on English Language Learning: A Study of Tadjik and Kyrgyz Students," *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence* 1, no. 2 (2025): 705–12.

²² Milligan, "Towards a Social and Epistemic Justice Approach for Exploring the Injustices of English as a Medium of Instruction in Basic Education."

²³ Dumisile Mkhize and Robert Balfour, "Language Rights in Education in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 6 (2017): 133–50.

²⁴ Rachel Bowden et al., "Learner-Centred Education and English Medium Instruction: Policies in Practice in a Lower-Secondary Mathematics Class in Rural Rwanda," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 54, no. 2 (2024): 294–313.

reading difficulties among learners.²⁵ In Mali, research suggests that 81% and 92% of learners in grades 3 and 4 could not read a single word in English,²⁶ with less than 4% demonstrate comprehension at 80% or above. Although the study focused on Grade 3 students, it indicates that learners in subsequent grades continue to struggle with English instruction. Additionally, Milligan and Tikly (2016) indicate that promoting English as a medium of instruction in the Global South is closely linked to the postcolonial context. Erling et al. suggest that the growth of low-cost private schools in Ghana and India is motivated by the push to adopt English as the language of instruction, as it is seen as the global “lingua franca.”²⁷

In South Africa, the National Education Policy Act of 1996, specifically section 4, outlines that the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) should be aligned with students' language preferences whenever feasible.²⁸ This Act emphasises the protection of learners' rights against unfair discrimination and guarantees them access to basic education and educational institutions. The existing South African curriculum policy states that students should be taught in their native languages until Grade 3, after which they transition to English or Afrikaans in Grade 4.²⁹ Manyike and Lemmer support this policy, noting that it is common practice in South African schools to utilise the mother tongue up to Grade 3 before shifting to English or Afrikaans in the Intermediate phase (grades 4 to 7).³⁰ The transition to English in Grade 4 presents significant challenges until Grade 8, as English are still perceived as a foreign language during this period. In response to this language barrier, some schools implement a second language as the medium of instruction starting from Grade 1.

Practical insights on English as a language of learning and teaching

Aside from educators' limited use of English in classrooms, students from disadvantaged communities have few or no genuine experiences with the English language. This lack of consistent English-language practice contributes to their lack of confidence in reading and in expressing themselves fluently and freely in English.³¹ Consequently, many students cannot read, write, listen to, or speak English independently, nor can they comprehend learning materials without teacher assistance.³² Shah (2023) noted that inadequate proficiency in English can lead to poor academic performance.³³

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is underpinned by Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT), initially developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and later expanded by scholars such as Lantolf et al.³⁴ SCT posits that learning is inherently a social process that occurs through interaction with others and is shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Central to this theory is the view that cognitive development is mediated by language, which serves as a psychological tool for internalising knowledge, shaping thought, and facilitating learning. According to Vygotsky, language is a means of communication and a primary mechanism through which learners make sense of their environment, construct meaning, and connect new information to prior knowledge. Ohta emphasises the foundational role of early language development,

²⁵ Lazaro Alman Kisumbe and Yusuph Lameck Mashala, “Effects of the Language of Instruction on Learning in Secondary Education and Its Implications in Workforce Preparation: A Case of Dodoma, Tanzania,” *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 10, no. 3 (2020): 215227.

²⁶ Sotco Claudius Komba and Stephen Bosco, “Do Students’ Backgrounds in the Language of Instruction Influence Secondary School Academic Performance?,” *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 30 (2015): 148–56.

²⁷ Elizabeth J Erling et al., “Medium of Instruction Policies in Ghanaian and Indian Primary Schools: An Overview of Key Issues and Recommendations,” *English as a Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial Contexts*, 2018, 18–34.

²⁸ Heugh, “Epistemologies in Multilingual Education: Translanguaging and Genre—Companions in Conversation with Policy and Practice.”

²⁹ Department of Education (DoE), *Revised National Curriculum Statement*.

³⁰ T V Manyike and E M Lemmer, “Research in Language Education in South Africa: Problems & Prospects,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 8 (2014): 251–58.

³¹ Elisa Korthof, “The Relation between Reading Strategies and Reading Comprehension,” *Student Undergraduate Research E-Journal!* 2 (2016).

³² Manyike and Lemmer, “Research in Language Education in South Africa: Problems & Prospects”; Andrew Hancock, “Learning Literacy in Multilingual Contexts: Scotland and South Africa,” in *From Words to Ideas: The Role of Literacy in Enhancing Young Children’s Development* (University of the Western Cape/British Council South Africa, 2018), 32–51.

³³ Sabina Shah, “English Language in the Context of Academic Performance: An Analysis,” *The Dialogue* 18, no. 1 (2023): 81–95.

³⁴ Matthew E Poehner and James P Lantolf, “Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Development,” in *Research Questions in Language Education and Applied Linguistics: A Reference Guide* (Springer, 2022), 871–77.

particularly in the home environment, in supporting learners' capacity to understand and process academic content.³⁵ Swain and Lapkin similarly argue that, through social interaction and language use, learners develop the ability to think critically, solve problems, and engage with complex concepts.³⁶ Milligan further contends that when a child's native language is undervalued or subordinated in the educational process, their ability to learn and engage meaningfully with the curriculum may be hindered.³⁷ This dynamic becomes especially problematic in contexts like South Africa, where English is often used as the primary language of instruction even though it is not the learners' home language. The theory highlights that language is not merely a passive conduit of information but an active agent in the learning process.

Socio-Cultural Theory provides a relevant and powerful lens to explore the relationship between the language of instruction and academic performance. It foregrounds the role of language in mediating learning, making it particularly suited to investigating how learners in rural, multilingual contexts navigate curriculum content delivered in English. This language may be unfamiliar or insufficiently mastered. The theory enables the study to examine how linguistic mismatches between home and school environments impact learners' ability to access and internalise academic knowledge. Given the persistent underperformance in matric results in the Amathole East region of the Eastern Cape, SCT enables an exploration of how language-related challenges, particularly in teacher and learner proficiency in English, might be contributing to these outcomes. By focusing on the social and cultural dimensions of learning, the theory supports a deeper understanding of how language policy and instructional practices intersect with learner development and academic success.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study approach was employed in this research to facilitate a thorough examination of the phenomenon under investigation. A key characteristic of case studies is their focus on a specific, defined system.³⁸ This methodology enables researchers to analyse the intricate relationships among phenomena, context, and individuals. For data gathering, semi-structured interviews were employed to obtain thick descriptions.

Population and Sampling

The study selected one secondary school within the Amathole East education district using simple random sampling, a probability sampling technique. This school was selected from 13 rural secondary schools in the Willowvale sub-district of the Amathole East Education District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The sample comprised six purposefully selected educators, three of whom taught grade 8 and three of whom taught grade 9. The teachers taught various subjects in the school, using English as the medium of instruction. These participants were thought to possess valuable insights due to their extensive experience teaching these grades, making them knowledgeable about classroom practices.

Data Collection

To tackle the research questions, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. Six teachers participated in individual interviews, each lasting approximately 1 hour, conducted during their breaks. The semi-structured format enabled the interviewer to explore responses more thoroughly, ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and request further details.

³⁵ Amy Snyder Ohta, "Applying Sociocultural Theory to an Analysis of Learner Discourse: Learner-Learner Collaborative Interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development," *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 6, no. 2 (1995): 93–121.

³⁶ Merrill Swain and Sharon Lapkin, "Interaction and Second Language Learning: Two Adolescent French Immersion Students Working Together," *The Modern Language Journal* 82, no. 3 (1998): 320–37.

³⁷ Milligan, "Towards a Social and Epistemic Justice Approach for Exploring the Injustices of English as a Medium of Instruction in Basic Education."

³⁸ J. H. McMillan and S. Schumacher, *Research in Education, Evidence Based Enquiry*, 7th ed. (Virginia: Commonwealth University, 2010).

Data Analysis

Six teachers from the selected school were interviewed. To maintain confidentiality, teachers were assigned codes such as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6, all of whom taught content subjects in Grades 8 and 9. The audio recordings were transcribed word-for-word, with multiple listens and rewinds before transcription. The assigned unique identification code was used to link the transcripts back to the respective teacher. Themes were then organised from the transcriptions. Statements or opinions that were repeatedly expressed were considered to reflect the common views of the group regarding each theme. Ultimately, the data were analysed and organised around these themes to address the research questions effectively.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained authorisation from the Provincial Director of the Department of Education, who provided a letter granting permission to conduct the research in schools. This authorisation allowed the researcher to collect data from a single school in the Willowvale Education District. Participants were asked to sign consent forms that addressed confidentiality, their rights, anonymity, transparency, and the need for informed consent.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most teachers reported being competent to teach their subjects in English, but their learners lack English proficiency, hence having problems understanding the learning content, as evidenced in the excerpts below:

T3: *“Yes, I can speak English well. I studied in a multiracial high school. However, that does not mean my learners are competent because they do not have the same background as I do. They are struggling to learn Life science; hence, I also use IsiXhosa to explain some concepts.”*

T5: *“English is the language of teaching and learning as per the CAPS Policy document from the Department. Also, my 13 years of experience make me comfortable teaching English, although my learners struggle during their first year in high school. That forces me to code-switch when teaching.”*

The two teachers cited above indicated that they do not have problems using English in their teaching. One can therefore conclude that these teachers use English to comply with the language policy and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. However, being competent in English as a teacher does not mean learners are also good in English. They must be able to read and write well. Teachers resort to code-switching to help learners understand the content.

The other three participants cited below indicated that they preferred bilingualism, which can also apply to examinations. The examination questions can be set in both IsiXhosa and English, so learners can understand what is asked. Participants' views are indicated in the excerpts below.

T1: *“In secondary schools, reading and writing are vital skills for learners. However, some may struggle with English due to their backgrounds and illiterate parents. To facilitate understanding and participation in Economics, I often use English and IsiXhosa in my lessons.”*

T2: *“What is the benefit of a teacher speaking fluent English if their students cannot grasp the material? Transitioning to IsiXhosa helps them comprehend the learning content more effectively. Why must we teach in English when there are numerous official languages in South Africa?”*

Another challenge expressed was that learners struggled to understand instructions when they were given in English. Teachers resorted to code-switching. Some of the responses are indicated below:

T2 and T3 shared this view: *“Most grade 8 learners struggle to understand instructions given in English. They are not comfortable even speaking during class. For them to respond, you must*

speak IsiXhosa, their home language. The problem is that assessments are conducted in English.”

Teachers also indicated that learners do not participate in class when English is used to teach them.

These findings reveal that, while learners are expected to learn in English, many are struggling to understand it. **T3:** drove the point home by stating, “It is easy for the learners to speak when addressed in IsiXhosa.”

T1: “*My grade 9 learners struggle with spelling and language structuring*”.

T3: “*My learners are pleased when I teach them in IsiXhosa. They are quiet in class most of the time, until I code-switch to enhance the learning process, because some learners do not understand certain concepts in the Geography subject. It is when I use IsiXhosa that the class is active.*”

The responses by the teachers reveal that learners feel more comfortable participating in class when taught in their home language than in a foreign language. This explains why teachers are sometimes forced to code-switch. One can conclude that teachers prepare their work in English, write on the board in English, but spend a lot of their teaching time translating their notes into the learners’ home language.

T6: “*Home language (isiXhosa) becomes a barrier regarding assessments because most learners had been taught by code switching. Now, the question paper is in English. How will you answer? Maybe they know it in IsiXhosa but will not answer, then fail.*”

T5: “*Some learners struggle to grasp concepts in English. Having periods specifically for reading will assist.*”

T3: “*The main challenge is using language, also known as diction. Limited vocabulary and the lack of mastery of structure (concord) are challenging. When responding to tests, you do not understand what the other person is saying.*”

T2: “*I encounter problems where learners give wrong answers, mainly because they do not understand the question. When you repeat the same instruction in IsiXhosa, they get the answers right.*”

Another challenge encountered when teaching and learning in English is understanding the subject’s key concepts. This results in teachers having to switch. It can be argued whether code-switching is effective for teaching, learning, and assessment, particularly whether teachers have the competence to code-switch effectively so that the curriculum’s objectives are attained. The finding supports Debreli and Oyman (2016), who emphasised the importance of focusing on becoming fluent in one’s first language to achieve good grades in school. Lofranco and Luzano (2023) reported that junior-level reading problems are a recipe for poor academic performance in grades 8 and 9. A strong oral foundation must be established to learn the FAL. However, adequate exposure to the language and adequate resources are required for the success of such a drive. Code switching does not appear to benefit learners, given that examinations are written in English.

T3: “*My learners speak English during a lesson, but they speak it for a short period after being guided to do so.*”

T5: “*Remember that in South Africa, LoLT from grades 1 to 3 is MT; it is only at grade 4 that they have to switch to English, hence we get ‘raw’ students who need a large amount of time to*

be taught English. My period is not for English but for Geography, but I help them because they are keen to learn.”

T1: *“The time allocated for periods is too little. Therefore, I take time for my subject and teach English. We devise some teaching strategies to support these poor learners.”*

T2: *“Our learners are unable to read, and their attitudes towards English assist them to learn with limited resources at their disposal.”*

The study revealed that learners have a positive attitude towards being taught English as a medium of instruction. This is so, though there are challenges in fully understanding the learning content. This aligns with the views of Bowden et al. (2024), who emphasised the importance of proficiency in English for effective learning and teaching. Learners are expected to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in the language of learning and teaching before they can engage seriously in learning. Proficiency in LoLT significantly influences learners' attitudes towards the material being taught.

Inadequate Teaching and Learning Resources

When participants were asked about the school infrastructure and teaching and learning resources that impact the school's use of English as a language of learning and teaching, they said the following.

T2: *“Mhh., we are facing various obstacles in terms of resources. We have large class sizes and a shortage of textbooks and other study materials. Our school had a library that was deliberately burnt down by former learners when they were denied a tour because of the lack of funds. We do not have Wi-Fi, though we have electricity. The Department gave us laptops, but we could not use them for teaching because of the internet.”*

T5: *“Conditions for good quality education are very few here. Our school is in a deep rural area. What does that mean? This means that over 90 parents are not educated and, as such, do not participate in their children’s education. Furthermore, since our school does not have Wi-Fi, we still use traditional methods, such as talking and writing on chalkboards. Our learners are disadvantaged compared to those in towns.”*

T3: *“Overcrowding and lack of books are the biggest problems. As a result, we use chalkboards to write notes. I group learners when issuing textbooks; 5 learners use one textbook. When giving them homework, it becomes a challenge.”*

Participants indicated that overcrowding has a significant impact on teaching and learning, particularly when there are insufficient teaching resources and textbooks. Due to limited resources and a lack of a library, teachers are compelled to rely on traditional instructional methods. These findings align with the research by Mncube, Ajani, Ngema and Mkhasibe (2023), who noted that Grade 4 teachers typically utilise traditional pedagogies and conventional learning materials, such as chalkboards and wall charts. Similarly, du Plessis and Mestry (2019) reported that, in South Africa, provincial governments face financial constraints that hinder their ability to provide rural schools with the essential support needed to ensure quality education for learners. Additionally, educational authorities are unable to provide schools with the critical physical and human resources they require, placing a significant burden on parents who must provide their children with necessities such as stationery and cleaning supplies. A study by Shah highlighted the vital role of the English language in today's world, indicating that without proficiency in English, individuals may struggle to access modern technology, the internet, and literature. Proficiency in English is essential not only for education but also for daily life.³⁹

³⁹ Shah, “English Language in the Context of Academic Performance: An Analysis.”

Lack of Parental Involvement

The study revealed that parents are stakeholders in education, as learning does not occur solely within the school environment. Learners' homes are learning environments that play a crucial role in supporting education. The following statements reflect this finding.

T2: *“Most of our learners are from disadvantaged backgrounds with parents with minimal literacy levels. This means they are on their own when giving learners some schoolwork since parents cannot help at all.”*

T3: *“Some parents lack the education to teach their children to read in English. Hence, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle with English skills.”*

T5: *“As a Life Science teacher, when I give my learners some assignment or homework, I know that I must explain properly, using IsiXhosa, what needs to be done so that parents can maybe assist them. This means the medium of instruction is not English.”*

T4: *“The big problem is that these learners use the IsiXhosa language and nothing else at home. So, they only engage in English when in class. This significantly negatively impacts their academic performance. Our pass rates are low compared with urban secondary schools.”*

One participant explained that utilising two separate languages, one at home and a different one in school, negatively affects the learners' capacity to grasp the learning content, thus they are unable to comprehend and apply what is being taught. Furthermore, learners have a limited vocabulary in their native language, which hinders their ability to answer assessment questions, particularly essay questions. A limited English vocabulary limits learners' ability to ask questions in English during class. This finding is supported by the literature, as seen in the works of Owu-Ewie and Eshun and Mpofu and Maphalala, who reported that students lack proficiency in the use of the English language both on and off school premises, which hinders their academic achievement.⁴⁰

The findings revealed that parental non-involvement negatively impacts learners' academic performance. In their studies, Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013) and Şengönül (2022) reported similar findings: that parents' non-participation in school matters is one of the causes of learners' poor performance. Furthering this argument, Şengönül contends that learners from families experiencing poverty have poor academic performance. In agreement, Chang, Choi, and Kim assert that parents often lack support networks and access to material and financial resources.⁴¹ As a result, low student performance in English reading, especially in primary schools, is attributed to socioeconomic status (Kainuwa & Yusuf, 2013). To improve their children's English-language learning, parents can be encouraged to be fully involved in school matters, both educational and non-educational.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

- Introduce English progressively from early grades to strengthen learners' proficiency and confidence over time.
- Invest in teacher training focused on English instruction, translanguaging, and multilingual strategies to enhance classroom effectiveness.

⁴⁰ Charles Owu-Ewie and Emma Sarah Eshun, “The Use of English as Medium of Instruction at the Upper Basic Level (Primary Four to Junior High School) in Ghana: From Theory to Practice,” *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2015): 72–82; Nhlanhla Mpofu and Mncedisi C Maphalala, “Content Subject Teachers' Views of Implementing the English Across the Curriculum (EAC) Approach: A Study of Some South African High Schools,” *Journal of Language and Education* 7, no. 2 (June 30, 2021): 189–203, <https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2021.11644>.

⁴¹ Mido Chang, Namok Choi, and Sunha Kim, “School Involvement of Parents of Linguistic and Racial Minorities and Their Children's Mathematics Performance,” *Educational Research and Evaluation* 21, no. 3 (2015): 209–31.

- Provide student-centred support and resources, including supplementary reading materials, structured language programmes, and accessible media to improve comprehension and engagement.
- Engage parents and communities to reinforce English learning through home-based activities, reading initiatives, and collaborative school programmes.
- Promote further research to explore how code-switching and other multilingual strategies affect teaching and learning in rural schools, generating insights to guide classroom practices and policy development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implications of English as a medium of instruction on the academic performance of Grade 8 and 9 learners in a rural South African high school. While learners recognized English as a valuable language of opportunity, limited proficiency hindered comprehension, participation, and achievement. Teachers frequently used code-switching to facilitate understanding, demonstrating that English can act as a barrier rather than a bridge to learning. Inadequate resources and limited parental involvement further compounded these challenges. The study concludes that improving educational outcomes in rural contexts requires contextually grounded strategies, including early exposure to English, bilingual practices, targeted teacher training, and active community engagement. Implementing these measures can enhance learner comprehension, participation, and equity, providing policymakers, educators, and curriculum planners with practical guidance on how to improve these aspects.

Furthermore, the results show that in South Africa, 30 years of democracy have brought minimal change to the education system, with most rural schools still experiencing challenges similar to those of 35 years ago. Most rural schools remain underfunded, overcrowded, and lack adequate infrastructure, learning materials, and qualified teaching staff. These factors negatively affect learning, particularly when English is used as LoLT. Failure to teach learners in their mother tongue robs them of their self-identity and alienates them from their culture. Through mother tongue teaching, learners are empowered both academically and culturally to become lifelong learners and productive members of society and the economy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boonsuk, Yusop. “Teacher, I Don’t Know How to Describe ‘Tom Yum Kung’ in English, but I Know ‘Hamburger’ and ‘Pizza’: Will Global Englishes Language Teaching Be a Beacon of Hope or a Recipe for Disaster in Thai ELT?” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 35, no. 2 (2025): 885–98.
- Bowden, Rachel, Innocente Uwineza, Jean-Claude Dushimimana, and Alphonse Uworwabayeho. “Learner-Centred Education and English Medium Instruction: Policies in Practice in a Lower-Secondary Mathematics Class in Rural Rwanda.” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 54, no. 2 (2024): 294–313.
- Brock-Utne, Birgit, Zubeida Desai, Martha A S Qorro, and Allan Pitman. *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa: Highlights from a Project*. Vol. 5. Brill, 2010.
- Cekiso, Madoda, Baba Tshotsho, and Rose Masha. “English Language Proficiency as a Predictor of Academic Achievement among Primary English First Additional Language Learners in South Africa.” *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 9, no. 3 (2015): 325–33.
- Chang, Mido, Namok Choi, and Sunha Kim. “School Involvement of Parents of Linguistic and Racial Minorities and Their Children’s Mathematics Performance.” *Educational Research and Evaluation* 21, no. 3 (2015): 209–31.
- Chen, Fu, Alfred Sakyi, and Ying Cui. “Linking Student, Home, and School Factors to Reading Achievement: The Mediating Role of Reading Self-Efficacy.” *Educational Psychology* 41, no. 10 (2021): 1260–79.
- Clegg, John, and John Simpson. “Improving the Effectiveness of English as a Medium of Instruction in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Comparative Education* 52, no. 3 (2016): 359–74.

- Coetzee, Sonja. "Sustaining Teacher Career Resilience in a Resource-Constrained Rural Education Setting: A Retrospective Study." University of Pretoria, 2013.
- Collen, Ian. "Language Trends England 2023: Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools in England," 2023.
- Cunningham, Clare. "When 'Home Languages' Become 'Holiday Languages': Teachers' Discourses about Responsibility for Maintaining Languages beyond English." *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 33, no. 3 (2020): 213–27.
- Department of Education (DoE). *Revised National Curriculum Statement*. Pretoria: Government Printer, 2002.
- Debreli, Emre, and Nadire Oyman. "Students' Preferences on the Use of Mother Tongue in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms: Is It the Time to Re-Examine English-Only Policies?" *English Language Teaching* 9, no. 1 (2016): 148-162.
- Desai, Zubeida. "Learning through the Medium of English in Multilingual South Africa: Enabling or Disabling Learners from Low-Income Contexts?" In *English as a Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial Contexts*, 67–82. Routledge, 2018.
- Erling, Elizabeth J, Lina Adinolfi, Anna Kristina Hultgren, Alison Buckler, and Mark Mukorera. "Medium of Instruction Policies in Ghanaian and Indian Primary Schools: An Overview of Key Issues and Recommendations." *English as a Medium of Instruction in Postcolonial Contexts*, 2018, 18–34.
- Fesi, Liziwe, and Vusumzi Mncube. "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives." *South African Journal of Education* 41, no.3(2021): 1–11.
- Grain, Hayder Mohammed Jawad Salih, Ghufra Al-Gburi, Osama Wael Suleiman, Tawfeeq Alghazali, Ahmed Jalil Kadhim, Aalaa Yaseen Hassan, and Imad Ibrahim Dawood. "Impact of English Language Proficiency, Multilingualism and Perceived Language Difficulties on International Students' Academic Performance in Iraq." *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2022): 160–70.
- Hancock, Andrew. "Learning Literacy in Multilingual Contexts: Scotland and South Africa." In *From Words to Ideas: The Role of Literacy in Enhancing Young Children's Development*, 32–51. University of the Western Cape/British Council South Africa, 2018.
- Heugh, Kathleen. "Epistemologies in Multilingual Education: Translanguaging and Genre–Companions in Conversation with Policy and Practice." *Language and Education* 29, no. 3 (2015): 280–85.
- Howie, Sarah J, Celeste Combrinck, Mishack Tshele, Karen Roux, Nelladee McLeod Palane, and Gabriel Mokoena. "PIRLS 2016: South African Highlights Report." Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA), 2017.
- Kainuwa, Ahmad, N. Binti, and M. Yusuf. "Influence of socio-economic and educational background of parents on their children's education in Nigeria." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 3, no. 10 (2013): 2250-3153.
- Kisumbe, Lazaro Alman, and Yusuph Lameck Mashala. "Effects of the Language of Instruction on Learning in Secondary Education and Its Implications in Workforce Preparation: A Case of Dodoma, Tanzania." *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 10, no. 3 (2020): 215227.
- Komba, Sotco Claudius, and Stephen Bosco. "Do Students' Backgrounds in the Language of Instruction Influence Secondary School Academic Performance?" *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 30 (2015): 148–56.
- Korthof, Elisa. "The Relation between Reading Strategies and Reading Comprehension." *Student Undergraduate Research E-Journal!* 2 (2016).
- Lofranco, C. C., and R. A. Luzano. "Factors Affecting the Reading Performance of the Junior High School Learners." *Factors Affecting the Reading Performance of the Junior High School Learners* 124, no. 1 (2023): 25-25.
- Makhathini, Freedom Nkanyiso, and Elliot Mthembeni Mncwango. "Challenges with the teaching and learning of the English language in a bilingual classroom." *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 17, no. 2 (2020): 71-85.

- Manyike, T.V., and E M Lemmer. "Research in Language Education in South Africa: Problems & Prospects." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 8 (2014): 251–58.
- McMillan, J. H., and S. Schumacher. *Research in Education, Evidence-Based Enquiry*. 7th ed. Virginia: Commonwealth University, 2010.
- Milligan, Lizzi O. "Towards a Social and Epistemic Justice Approach for Exploring the Injustices of English as a Medium of Instruction in Basic Education." *Educational Review* 74, no. 5 (2022): 927–41.
- Milligan, Lizzi O, Zubeida Desai, and Carol Benson. "A Critical Exploration of How Language-of-Instruction Choices Affect Educational Equity." In *Grading Goal Four*, 116–34. Brill, 2020.
- Milligan, Lizzi O., and Leon Tikly. "English as a medium of instruction in postcolonial contexts: Moving the debate forward." *Comparative Education* 52, no. 3 (2016): 277-280.
- Mkhize, Dumisile, and Robert Balfour. "Language Rights in Education in South Africa." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 6 (2017): 133–50.
- Mncube, Dumisani Wilfred, Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, Thandi Ngema, and Rachel Gugu Mkhasibe. "Exploring the problems of limited school resources in rural schools and curriculum management." *UMT Education Review* 6, no. 2 (2023): 1-31.
- Mpofu, Nhlanhla, and Mncedisi C Maphalala. "Content Subject Teachers' Views of Implementing the English Across the Curriculum (EAC) Approach: A Study of Some South African High Schools." *Journal of Language and Education* 7, no. 2 (June 30, 2021): 189–203.
<https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2021.11644>.
- Ohta, Amy Snyder. "Applying Sociocultural Theory to an Analysis of Learner Discourse: Learner-Learner Collaborative Interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development." *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 6, no. 2 (1995): 93–121.
- Owu-Ewie, Charles, and Emma Sarah Eshun. "The Use of English as a Medium of Instruction at the Upper Basic Level (Primary Four to Junior High School) in Ghana: From Theory to Practice." *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2015): 72–82.
- Poehner, Matthew E, and James P Lantolf. "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Development." In *Research Questions in Language Education and Applied Linguistics: A Reference Guide*, 871–77. Springer, 2022.
- Probyn, Margie. "Pedagogical translanguaging: Bridging discourses in South African science classrooms." In *Language in Epistemic Access*, pp. 42-58. Routledge, 2018.
- Saneka, Nora E., and Marike de Witt. "Barriers and bridges between mother tongue and English as a second language in young children." *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1-8.
- Sengonul, Turhan. "A Review of the Relationship between Parental Involvement and Children's Academic Achievement and the Role of Family Socioeconomic Status in This Relationship." *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction* 12, no. 2 (2022): 32-57.
- Shah, Sabina. "English Language in the Context of Academic Performance: An Analysis." *The Dialogue* 18, no. 1 (2023): 81–95.
- Shan, Law Woon, and Azlina Abdul Aziz. "A systematic review of teaching English in rural settings: Challenges and solutions." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 6 (2022): 1956-1977.
- Sibanda, Brian, and Michelle Joubert. "The Language Contestations and Complexities at a South African Higher Education Institution." *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* 6, no. 2 (2024): 78-94.
- Sibanda, Rockie, and Lina P. Tshehla. "From mother tongue to English: A language policy shift at a multilingual township school in Gauteng." *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 15, no. 1 (2025): 1598.
- Swain, Merrill, and Sharon Lapkin. "Interaction and Second Language Learning: Two Adolescent French Immersion Students Working Together." *The Modern Language Journal* 82, no. 3 (1998): 320–37.
- Wildsmith-Cromarty, Rosemary, and Robert J Balfour. "Language Learning and Teaching in South African Primary Schools." *Language Teaching* 52, no. 3 (2019): 296–317.

Yokubjonova, D. “Exploring the Impact of Social Backgrounds on English Language Learning: A Study of Tadjik and Kyrgyz Students.” *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence* 1, no. 2 (2025): 705–12.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Nondwe Daphne Mariana Mtshatsha holds a Doctor of Education degree. She is a lecturer at the Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Faculty of Education, Department of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, in Mthatha, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Research areas are Higher Education and Sustainable Development, Curriculum Studies, and Consumer Science and Entrepreneurship.