



Unlocking historical understanding: The role of English language proficiency in Grade 12 History teaching and performance in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the influence of English language proficiency on Grade 12 History teaching and learning in South African high schools. It examined the impact of English as the main language of teaching and assessment on learners' understanding of historical concepts, participation in class, and academic results. Guided by Cummins Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) concept, the study used a qualitative case study design with semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations in rural, township, and urban schools. The findings showed that learners generally achieve a contextual understanding of historical events, but their limited academic English skills hinder their source-based analysis, extended essay writing, and higher-order reasoning. Teachers tried to solve these problems by switching between languages and translanguaging, which improved understanding and learners' confidence, but these strategies were seldom used and lacked structured pedagogical support. The study concluded that the predominance of English, without targeted linguistic support, disadvantages learners from multilingual and marginalized communities. It recommends professional development, curriculum-based language support, and pedagogical strategies that both value learners' multilingualism and strengthen their academic English proficiency. This research imparts a new perspective to the existing knowledge by proving that historical literacy requires linguistic justice.

Keywords - English language proficiency, Grade 12 History, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), Multilingual Classrooms, Code-switching.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, language in the classroom has a great impact not only on the knowledge that is passed on to learners but also on those who have access to it. As the dominant language, English is still a strong factor determining the educational paths of learners. It often favours native English speakers or those already proficient in it, while it restricts those who are not. This is most obvious in subjects such as History, where the students' understanding depends a lot on the language of instruction. In History, learners need to analyse complex ideas, appraise information, and submit well-constructed arguments,

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which are skills that strongly depend on one's command of academic language.¹ However, in South Africa, a country known for its linguistic diversity and where the constitution promotes multilingualism, English is still the only language widely used in senior secondary education. This situation, therefore, poses significant difficulties for the coming of age of learners from multilingual and disadvantaged communities.²

History as a subject involves much more than rote learning of dates or events; it is about learners being able to question narratives, interpret primary and secondary sources, and write evidence-based arguments. For Grade 12 learners, this means dealing with abstract themes such as resistance to apartheid, the transition from apartheid to democracy and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Learners with limited English proficiency usually understand these historical processes at a conceptual level but have difficulty expressing their knowledge in academic writing. This creates a double problem: first, they have to learn the historical content and second, the linguistic structures which will enable them to communicate it effectively.³

A large number of learners lack sufficient Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to cope with English as a language of instruction when they enter the Further Education and Training (FET) phase.⁴ Conversational English indeed is enough for daily communication, but History demands accurate use of vocabulary, analytical thinking, and the skill of writing extended essays within time constraints. The disparity is most visible in rural and township schools where learners have less exposure to English outside school and few chances to practice academic writing.⁵

Teachers often find themselves caught between the expectations laid down by policies and their actual experiences in the classroom. For instance, South Africa's Language in Education Policy (LiEP) advocates for additive bilingualism and the strategic use of home languages. Nevertheless, classrooms focus mainly on English to conform to assessment standards.⁶ As a means of assisting learners, teachers have resorted to code-switching and translanguaging, whereby they translate or explain complex historical concepts in the learners' home languages. These techniques not only help in better understanding and participation, but they are also hardly ever used consistently and are not officially recognized as part of pedagogy or curriculum planning.⁷

In light of this, the article reviews the role of English language skills in the teaching and learning of Grade 12 History in various South African high schools. It investigates how the use of English affects classroom participation, understanding, academic performance, and how teachers handle language barriers. By focusing on the experiences of both learners and teachers, the study aims to illuminate how history literacy becomes a matter of language, equity, and pedagogy in South Africa's multilingual classrooms.

¹ Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, "The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts," 2012; Sam Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts," *Phi Delta Kappan* 92, no. 4 (2010): 81–94.

² Neville Alexander, *English Unassailable but Unattainable: The Dilemma of Language Policy in South African Education (PRAESA Occasional Papers No. 3)* (University of Cape Town, 2000). Kathleen Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 33 (2013): 215–37.

³ Jim Cummins, *Language, Power and Pedagogy* (Multilingual Matters, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853596773>; Janus Roostenburg et al., "Exploring Factors Influencing Academic Literacy – A Data-Driven Perspective," *South African Journal of Information Management* 26, no. 1 (March 29, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/SAJIM.v26i1.1729..>

⁴ Xolisa Guzula and Soraya Abdulatief, "Supporting Teacher Dispositions towards Translanguaging-for-Learning in a Grade 9 Mathematics Classroom," *Reading & Writing* 15, no. 1 (November 19, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/RW.v15i1.503>; Kathleen Heugh, "Chapter 6. Language and Literacy Issues in South Africa," in *Global Issues in Language, Education and Development* (Multilingual Matters, 2007), 187–217, <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599538-009..>

⁵ Nicholas Spaull, "Disentangling the Language Effect in South African Schools: Measuring the Impact of 'Language of Assessment' in Grade 3 Literacy and Numeracy," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 6, no. 1 (December 3, 2016): 20, <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v6i1.475>.

⁶ Department of Basic Education, *Annual National Assessments Results 2014* (Republic of South , 2014).

⁷ Leketi Makalela, "Moving out of Linguistic Boxes: The Effects of Translanguaging Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms," *Language and Education* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 200–217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994524>; Margie Probyn, "Pedagogical Translanguaging: Bridging Discourses in South African Science Classrooms," *Language and Education* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 218–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994525..>

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language as a Gatekeeper to Historical Knowledge

English continues to be the language of instruction in South African schools, and the choice of language has a major impact on the learners' access to knowledge. English, which was adopted under the colonial and apartheid education systems, is still seen as the language of power whose knowledge counts and whose learning is recognised; thus, it plays a big role in formal schooling.⁸ The linguistic hierarchy created this way has a big influence on history education since the subject discusses power, identity, and different interpretations of the past.

Teaching history almost entirely through the English language puts learners who are not very proficient in English at a structural disadvantage. Their problems are usually the result of linguistic exclusion rather than a lack of historical knowledge. Therefore, learners' first language and cultural interpretations of meaning are disregarded in classroom interactions, resulting in fewer opportunities for learners to get deeply involved in interpreting and debating history. Language, therefore, is not only a medium of instruction but also a method that limits learners' epistemic access and participation. Studies emphasize that English is a gatekeeping tool that determines the academic journey and achievement, especially in rural and low-resource areas where learners hardly get any exposure to English outside the classroom.⁹ It is argued that in such scenarios, History lessons taught only in English may be deeply entrenched in educational disadvantage if Language fluency is emphasized over Historical thinking. Therefore, there is a serious concern about whether the language practices in the History classrooms just limit or can also broaden the learners' access to historical knowledge and their ability to engage in the production and interpretation of historical accounts.

Academic Language Demands in Historical Reasoning

The difference between the fluency needed in everyday communication and the specialised language required for academic learning is a significant point of view in understanding learner performance in History. Cummins's model explains that while learners may acquire conversational English rather quickly, the development of academic language proficiency, which allows engaging with textbooks, assessments and the discipline discourse, is a much longer process.¹⁰ This division is especially significant in History, where the ability to interpret sources, construct logical arguments, and show evaluative and analytical thinking through lengthier writing is what separates the successful from the less successful learners. In senior secondary classrooms, insufficient academic language proficiency can affect learners' ability to engage successfully with academic reading and writing tasks, including essay writing and the construction of coherent arguments.¹¹ A study in South Africa revealed that a significant number of learners demonstrated conceptual understanding of the historical content but barely communicated their understanding properly in English, resulting in poor assessment scores.¹² Those problems are still prevalent in the Grade 12 level, where the assessment standards require not only the use of historical terminology but also the production of well-structured and logically developed arguments in analytical writing over time.

There are still studies that show a significant correlation between limited Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency and poor performance in History tests. The research findings reveal that learners' difficulty in understanding and using academic English limits their ability to demonstrate historical reasoning skills, although their knowledge of the content is not necessarily lacking.¹³ This points to the

⁸ Alexander, *English Unassailable but Unattainable: The Dilemma of Language Policy in South African Education (PRAESA Occasional Papers No. 3)*; Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections."

⁹ Makalela, "Moving out of Linguistic Boxes: The Effects of Translanguaging Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms."

¹⁰ Cummins, *Language, Power and Pedagogy*.

¹¹ Tracey Millin and Mark Millin, "English Academic Writing Convergence for Academically Weaker Senior Secondary School Students: Possibility or Pipe-Dream?," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 31 (January 2018): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2017.12.002>.

¹² Guzula and Abdulatief, "Supporting Teacher Dispositions towards Translanguaging-for-Learning in a Grade 9 Mathematics Classroom"; Heugh, "Chapter 6. Language and Literacy Issues in South Africa."

¹³ Roestenburg et al., "Exploring Factors Influencing Academic Literacy – A Data-Driven Perspective."

fact that language proficiency should not be considered as a secondary skill, but rather as a central element of historical learning and assessment at the senior secondary level.

Disciplinary Literacy and the Study of History

Instead of simply delivering factual information, History is a discipline that is deeply rooted in specialised literacy practices. Learners have to handle different types of texts, such as archival documents, historical accounts, images, and scholarly discussions, all of which require careful reading and interpretation. Their interaction with these materials is mainly based on their proficiency in the use of discipline-specific language, which is related to explanation, causation, evaluation, and argumentation.¹⁴

When it comes to learners who use English as a second language (ESL), the demands of disciplinary knowledge pose many challenges to them. They find it difficult to go through dense historical texts, abstract concepts, and examination questions that require sophisticated argumentation. Therefore, learners rely heavily on superficial strategies such as rote learning of factual content rather than critically engaging with historical evidence and interpretations. Studies show that this kind of behaviour is more prevalent in rural schools where learners have limited exposure to English except for the classroom, and the opportunities to develop the academic literacy needed for historical investigation are limited.¹⁵

These challenges highlight the extent to which success in History is shaped by access to disciplinary language. Without targeted pedagogical support that explicitly develops historical literacy, learners' performance may reflect linguistic constraints rather than their capacity to think historically. This reinforces the need for teaching approaches that recognise language as central to historical understanding and assessment.

Language in the History Classroom

Teachers in linguistically diverse History classes often rely on multilingual practices such as code-switching and translanguaging to facilitate learner understanding. These practices allow learners to draw on their first language(s) as a cognitive tool when grappling with challenging historical concepts before giving their response in English.¹⁶ The literature review shows that they help learners better understand and engage in class, especially when English is a second language. These language practices have great potential for use in History teaching and learning, but they continue to be used only as informal, occasional, and individual teacher efforts rather than being integrated into the curricular or pedagogical frameworks.¹⁷ Therefore, learners' multilingual resources remain on the margins of formal History instruction.

Language Awareness in History Teaching Practice

The ability of teachers to communicate effectively in English and their readiness to deal with the linguistic challenges resulting from English as a medium of instruction are major factors in teacher effectiveness. In South Africa, many teachers lack training in language-aware pedagogy and tend to prioritize subject content communication over the explicit teaching of disciplinary language.¹⁸ Hence, in History classrooms, language problems are often handled orally and informally without any attention being paid to pedagogically structured approaches. Studies carried out so far reveal that, if

¹⁴ Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts"; Seixas and Morton, "The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts."

¹⁵ Spaull, "Disentangling the Language Effect in South African Schools: Measuring the Impact of 'Language of Assessment' in Grade 3 Literacy and Numeracy."

¹⁶ Makalela, "Moving out of Linguistic Boxes: The Effects of Translanguaging Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms."

¹⁷ Kagiso Thapelo Lekhethe, Boitumelo Benjamin Moreeng, and Pfuraai Chimbunde, "Exploring the Use of Translanguaging Pedagogy to Enhance Epistemic Access for History Learners," *International Journal of Multilingual Education* 27, no. 1 (May 15, 2026): 75–96, <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2026.11531>.

¹⁸ Guzula and Abdulatief, "Supporting Teacher Dispositions towards Translanguaging-for-Learning in a Grade 9 Mathematics Classroom."

there is no planned language support, learners can rely on only surface-level learning strategies, which significantly limit their skills in making historical statements in formal academic contexts.¹⁹

Policy Intentions and Linguistic Practice in History Classrooms

South Africa's Language in Education Policy advocates for and encourages learners' home languages to be considered as learning resources.²⁰ This has been further reinforced by the examination systems that are dominated by English.²¹ This disconnect between the policy to act and the situation in the classroom has significant consequences for cognitive access. When home languages are pushed to the margins, English is given a gatekeeping role that determines how knowledge is accessed and shown. In History classrooms, where learning means critically engaging with narratives related to identity, memory, and experience, this linguistic gap may limit learners' engagement and language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is rooted in Cummins language proficiency theory, which has two components: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).²² BICS is about being able to hold a casual conversation in familiar contexts, while CALP is the use of language for academic purposes, including abstract thinking, critical analysis, and subject-specific literacy. In this theory, Cummins points out that learners might get conversational English very fast, but it will take significantly longer to develop academic English proficiency, which, in addition, needs explicit teaching.

In South African Grade 12 History, the distinction mentioned above is crucial. Learners, for example, might be able to talk about a historical events in English during casual conversation, showing BICS; however, they fail when they are asked to interpret primary sources, write evidence-based arguments, or complete timed essays during examinations. The tasks demand CALP, a level of academic language proficiency that many non-English home language learners have not fully developed. Therefore, the difference between BICS and CALP influences History learners' performance, as the subject is heavily dependent on mastery of academic literacy skills.

The Cummins framework further stresses how the language of instruction can play a crucial role in either advancing or limiting the development of CALP. Though learners in South Africa come from diverse language backgrounds, English is overwhelmingly used as the language of teaching and learning. Consequently, these learners are tasked with the double challenge of learning the content of the subjects and mastering academic English as a language. If language support is not provided systematically, a considerable number of learners will be stuck at the level of conversational fluency and will therefore be unable to progress to the level of in-depth academic engagement, which, in this case, is required in History.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Approach

This research is aligned with the interpretivist paradigm that recognizes reality as a social construct and meaning as a result of people's experiences and collaboration.²³ This conceptual lens was used to investigate how proficiency in the English language influences the teaching and learning of Grade 12 History in schools with different educational contexts. Instead of searching for eternal and universally applicable truths, the qualitative study targets subjective meanings that teachers and learners attach to their experiences in the classroom. The qualitative

¹⁹ Spaull, "Disentangling the Language Effect in South African Schools: Measuring the Impact of 'Language of Assessment' in Grade 3 Literacy and Numeracy."

²⁰ Probyn, "Pedagogical Translanguaging: Bridging Discourses in South African Science Classrooms."

²¹ Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections"; Celimpilo Dladla, "Assessing the Intersectionality of Language Anxiety and Outcomes for African Learners Writing Examinations in English," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, September 30, 2024, 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20245121>.

²² Cummins, *Language, Power and Pedagogy*; Jim Cummins, "Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency, Linguistic Interdependence, the Optimum Age Question and Some Other Matters. Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 19," 1979.

²³ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2018).

research method was selected to understand classroom practices, teacher strategies, and learner experiences. Qualitative research is a methodologically fitting choice when analysing complex educational phenomena such as instructional decisions, learner involvement, and assessment methods in real school settings.²⁴ This method corresponds to the theoretical framework that sees language as a tool for cognitive development and a factor that determines one's understanding of knowledge.

Research Design

Three public high schools located in rural, township, and urban areas, respectively, were the focus of the multiple case study design. A case study research approach is suitable for exploring real-life phenomena, especially when the distinction between the phenomenon and the context is not clear.²⁵ To make a thorough comparison of different teaching practices, learner experiences, and institutional conditions, each of the three schools was treated as an independent case. The chosen schools are representative of different educational contexts in South Africa, namely a rural school having infrastructure challenges, lack of textbooks, and high teacher-to-learner ratios; a township school facing problems of overcrowding, socio-economic issues, and lack of parental involvement; and an urban school having better facilities, access to technology, and external support. The inclusion of such diverse locations enabled the study to investigate the impact of the learners' proficiency in the English language on the teacher's methods, students' participation, and the results of various assessments across different socio-educational settings, thereby giving a broad picture of Grade 12 History classrooms.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants directly involved in the teaching and learning of Grade 12 History. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables researchers to obtain in-depth information from participants with relevant knowledge and experience.²⁶ The study included six Grade 12 History teachers, with two teachers selected from each of the three schools representing rural, township, and urban contexts. Teachers were selected based on their experience teaching History at senior secondary level and their familiarity with preparing learners for high-stakes examinations. In addition, 30 Grade 12 learners participated in the study, with 10 learners selected from each school to ensure variation in academic achievement and socio-educational backgrounds. Including both teachers and learners allowed for triangulation of perspectives by comparing teacher practices with learner experiences. Although the sample was relatively small, the inclusion of rural, township, and urban schools provided sufficient contextual diversity to explore differences in teaching methods and learner performance. The sample size was considered appropriate because qualitative case study research prioritises depth of understanding rather than large samples.²⁷

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured Interviews

History teachers and learners were interviewed through semi-structured interviews in which their instructional practices, beliefs about learner performance, and strategies for supporting learners in History were discussed. The preparation of an interview guide ensured consistency among the interviewees. At the same time, the guide gave freedom to explore further emerging issues. Each interview was about 30-40 minutes long and was recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

Observations

To see how Grade 12 History was taught, classroom observations were made. To facilitate note-taking, an observation schedule was drawn up, with a focus on teacher-learner interactions, instructional strategies, and learner participation. Each teacher was observed twice; thus,

²⁴ N. K Denzin and Y. S Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed (Sage, 2018).

²⁵ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018).

²⁶ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

²⁷ Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*.

a total of 12 classroom observations were carried out. Observation data were used to validate the interview findings and to ascertain whether the practices reported and the practices carried out agreed.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis. The transcripts of the interviews and notes from the observations were reread several times to become deeply familiar with the content. The first codes came out inductively, and later they were combined into bigger groups, which were in line with the research purpose and theoretical framework. Themes were polished to make sure they were logical and consistent. The researchers decided to use thematic analysis because it provides a way to be both flexible and systematic while finding patterns in data that come from different sources. Additionally, this approach makes it possible for findings not to be those that a researcher has imposed but rather those that have sprung from the data on their own.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The research complied with the trustworthiness criteria of Lincoln and Guba: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.²⁸ A triangulation of methodologies, i.e., interviews and classroom observations, was used to increase credibility. Besides, a long exposure at the schools helped to build credibility by developing a good relationship with the participants and allowing the researcher to observe the practices over time. Besides, the researcher kept detailed documentation of the procedures and decisions taken at each stage, which made the research process transparent, systematic and hence dependable. The researchers also kept a reflective journal that helped to keep a check on their own assumptions and possible biases and confirmability. Transferability was made possible by the provision of detailed descriptions of the locations of the research that allow the readers to make a judgment about the extent to which the findings can be applicable in similar educational settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics played a major role in this research from the start, especially since learners were part of the study. The research observed the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.²⁹ The research team obtained ethical clearance from the university ethics committee, and the school management allowed the research to be conducted in the schools. Teachers signed the informed consent form, while parental consent and learner assent were acquired for the student participants, following the code of ethics when conducting research with children.³⁰ Participants were given full disclosure about the study's questions, procedures, and their rights, which included the right to refuse or discontinue participation at any stage without consequence.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Demographic Information

The study consisted of 36 participants from three secondary schools representing rural, township, and urban settings. The participants included six Grade 12 History teachers and thirty Grade 12 learners. Two teachers were selected from each school, while ten learners were selected from each school. The learner participants represented different levels of academic achievement and varied socio-educational backgrounds. The inclusion of participants from different school contexts allowed the study to obtain diverse perspectives and experiences related to the teaching and learning of History.

Language Barriers and Historical Understanding

It is evident from the study that Grade 12 learners still face a high degree of difficulty with English language proficiency, especially when learning History. Although they have been taught in

²⁸ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).

²⁹ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

³⁰ British Educational Research Association [BERA], "Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research," 2024.

English for many years, a large number of learners face the challenge of understanding academic vocabulary and complex sentence structures in both textbooks and examinations. For instance, a learner pointed out, *"The teacher talking about the anti-apartheid struggle in English is something I can understand bit by bit. However, the whole idea is lost on me quite often. I feel that I've got the history but just can't express it in English"* (Learner-School B). Moreover, another learner stated, *"I'm quite familiar with the transition from apartheid to democracy in my language. However, when I have to write it in English, the right words just slip my mind, and my response looks incomplete"* (Learner-School A).

Teachers acknowledged these challenges and shared that learners usually misunderstand important terms like liberation, legislation, and democracy if explanations are not given. Such findings also agree with Cummins explanation of the difference between BICS and CALP, where he pointed out that academic language takes longer to develop, hence the requirement of intentional support.³¹ When that support is not given, learners' opportunity to properly understand the historical content is pretty much limited. This is one of the problems frequently noted in the research on academic literacy in South Africa.³²

Multilingual Strategies and Classroom Support

Teachers from rural, township, and urban schools equally used multilingual strategies such as code-switching and translanguaging to help learners flesh out difficult historical concepts and thus keep them interested. A teacher shared, *"Sometimes I explain the historical terms in English, then translate them into Sepedi so that the learners can get the point deeply before we go on"* (Teacher-School C). Another teacher commented, *"When learners look puzzled, I speak isiZulu. For instance, when we talk about the origins of the Cold War, I tell the story in English first and then give a short summary in isiZulu. Immediately, more hands are raised, and the learners start discussing the topic"* (Teacher-School B).

Learners recognized the value of these approaches. One learner remarked, *"When the teacher repeats the history lesson in our language, I believe I understand it better. It becomes so much easier to make connections between the ideas, and I am not at all scared to ask questions"* (Student-School A). From the observations, it seems using different languages in the classroom is very helpful in closing understanding gaps; however, the extent of its usage still depends on the school. While some teachers used translanguaging all the time, others only allowed its use to a minimum as they were preparing learners for their English medium examinations. This mirrors the ongoing multilingual teaching pedagogy discussions, where, on one hand, translanguaging has the potential to improve students' learning, but the threat of losing the examination through the domination of a high-stakes assessment system limits its use.³³

Learner Engagement and Linguistic Confidence

Learner participation was strongly correlated with the language of classroom interactions. The use of English only, as pushed by the teachers, was found to greatly hinder the learners' willingness to contribute, resulting in very little engagement. On the other hand, when teachers permitted the use of mother tongues, participation soared, and the learners even exhibited more confidence. A learner shared: *"I feel shy to speak in English because I worry about making mistakes. But when I think in my own language first, I can explain the answer better and sometimes even help my classmates"* (Learner-School A). Another one said: *"In English, I only give short answers. But when I use Sepedi, I can explain the whole story, like why people resisted apartheid. It makes me feel proud that I know the history"* (Learner-School C). The evidence here is consistent with Makalela's notion that learners feel more self-assured and are motivated to participate when their linguistic identities are

³¹ Cummins, *Language, Power and Pedagogy*.

³² Heugh, "Chapter 6. Language and Literacy Issues in South Africa."

³³ Makalela, "Moving out of Linguistic Boxes: The Effects of Translanguaging Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms."

acknowledged.³⁴ They also fit well with the socio-cultural viewpoint, which highlights language as a key resource through which learning and identity are shaped.³⁵

Assessment and Academic Language Demands

There was a direct correlation between learners' achievement in assessments and their command of academic English. Assessment activities revealed that learners were able to recall facts but had difficulties in answering higher-order questions requiring explanation, analysis or argumentation. According to teachers, learners often grasped the content conceptually but were unable to communicate their reasoning effectively in English. A teacher remarked, *"They know the causes of the Cold War and can discuss them orally, but when they write, they have difficulty linking causes and consequences in proper English. Their ideas are right, but the language causes them to lose marks"* (Teacher-School B).

This observation supports Schleppegrell's argument that the level of proficiency in academic English plays a major role in the learner's ability to exhibit their understanding in examinations.³⁶ It also corresponds with research conducted in South Africa, which found that limited English proficiency can hide conceptual understanding.³⁷

Teacher Preparedness and Language-Aware Support

Even though all the teachers involved in the study were qualified History teachers, only a very small number had undergone formal training in language-aware pedagogy. Many of them depended on improvised reactions at a personal level rather than following a clear scaffolding strategy to facilitate the language development of their learners. One of the teachers said: *"I think if there was a workshop where content and language are taught together, that would help because at times, I am not sure of the right way to support learners with these English terms"* (Teacher-School A). Another one declared: *"We are trained to teach History, not language. But every day I see that language is the biggest barrier"* (Teacher- School B).

These observations are consistent with Lekhethe et al., who highlight the potential of translanguaging pedagogy to enhance epistemic access among History learners.³⁸ Teachers who are not provided with structured support tend to resort to using ad-hoc strategies, which may not be beneficial for learners' understanding transfer to formal academic contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving History education in multilingual classrooms can be achieved through professional development, which is most effective when it is focused on equipping teachers with a language-aware strategy that integrates disciplinary literacy. Curriculum materials should be designed to provide scaffolding for learners' use of the academic language, for example, glossaries, bilingual aids, and structured supports that facilitate the gradual mastery of academic English. Schools should officially recognise the use of multilingual practices, thus allowing learners to think through the concepts in their home languages before expressing them in English, which will then result in increased participation and confidence. Assessment practices should consider the language-related difficulties by providing feedback that differentiates between the learner's conceptual understanding and his/her linguistic proficiency. At a policy level, there is a need for a closer alignment between the Language in Education Policy and the actual classroom situations so that schools are assisted to implement multilingual strategies without inadvertently disqualifying their learners from succeeding in high-stakes examinations. If these measures are taken, English will no longer be a barrier but rather a tool of

³⁴ Makalela, "Moving out of Linguistic Boxes: The Effects of Translanguaging Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms."

³⁵ Lev S Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard university press, 1978).

³⁶ Mary J. Schleppegrell, *The Language of Schooling* (Routledge, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410610317>.

³⁷ Spaul, "Disentangling the Language Effect in South African Schools: Measuring the Impact of 'Language of Assessment' in Grade 3 Literacy and Numeracy."

³⁸ Lekhethe, Moreeng, and Chimbunde, "Exploring the Use of Translanguaging Pedagogy to Enhance Epistemic Access for History Learners."

learning, enabling learners from different backgrounds and contexts in South Africa to have equal access to historical knowledge and fostering inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals how English significantly impacts the teaching and learning of History in Grade 12 in South Africa. It also opens the door to worldwide academic debates and standardised testing, yet its overpowering presence leaves learners with limited knowledge of academic English at a serious disadvantage. A large number of learners were able to grasp the historical events at a conceptual level but had trouble expressing their knowledge in the examination papers. To help learners overcome these challenges, teachers used the multilingual strategy of switching between languages and translanguaging, which not only increased the understanding of the material but also the willingness to participate, although these methods were only sporadically used and were mostly without formal training support. The investigation reveals that language is more than just a tool for communication; rather, it is an essential ingredient for epistemic access. The overuse of English without proper support can lead to the exclusion of learners, especially those in underprivileged and rural areas. These findings underpin the call for teaching methodologies that not only help in the development of academic English but also acknowledge and leverage the learners' multilingual linguistic practices, hence allowing them to engage meaningfully with History as a discipline.

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