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Teaching English as a home language to immigrant learners: Experiences of Foundation Phase Educators in Gauteng

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, migration in the Gauteng province of South Africa (SA) has increased, resulting in schools being highly affected as the number of immigrant learners enrolled in SA schools continues to rise. Immigrant enrollment in SA schools affects educators' instructional practices, particularly when they are tasked with teaching languages, as most immigrant learners speak languages that educators are unfamiliar with. This often results in academic exclusion among immigrants due to language barriers. Hence, this study explores the experiences of foundation-phase educators teaching English HL to immigrant learners. A qualitative research approach and a multiple-case study design were employed to gain insight into educators' experiences. This study was grounded in the funds-of-knowledge theory. Data were collected from six purposefully selected foundation-phase educators. This study found that educators often struggle to accommodate immigrant learners in their classrooms due to linguistic barriers, which compromise their academic participation. Educators also reported that they do not receive government support on how to teach immigrant learners, which poses a challenge for them, as the training they receive uses a one-size-fits-all approach. This study advocates for inclusive language policies in South African schools that promote social cohesion and epistemic access for immigrants and emphasizes the need for in-service training for language educators focused on multilingual pedagogies to assist educators in managing multiple languages during instructional activities. This study contributes to the field of study on multilingualism in the foundation phase, particularly regarding immigrants' education in the SA context.

Keywords: Migration, Immigrant Learners, Academic Exclusion, Language Barriers, In-service Training, Epistemic Access

INTRODUCTION

The Foundation Phase (FP) is an entry phase of schooling in South Africa (SA). It is one of the crucial stages of children's education, as it is the phase where they gain academic knowledge through educators' instructional practices. In SA schools, instructional activities are presented in different languages, depending on the school's language policy, which determines the Language of Learning and Teaching

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(LoLT).[1] The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) clearly indicates that learners in the FP should receive instruction in their mother tongue.[2] However, current practices indicate that most SA learners receive instruction in English as early as the FP, although their mother tongue is an indigenous language.[3] This practice is caused by the fact that schools' language policies are determined by School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and parents who are part of the SGBs have a choice in the school's language policies and where they enroll their children. This practice also reflects the mismatch between policy aspirations and classroom practices.

Research indicates that it is not only SA learners who receive instruction in a language that is not their HL as early as the FP; immigrant learners enrolled in local SA schools are affected. This is because, when people from neighbouring African countries migrate to SA, they come with their families, particularly children, and when they migrate, they do not leave their home languages behind; instead, they carry them as part of their identities.[4] In his study, Babane found that immigrant learners do not speak or fully understand SA local languages but only retain their indigenous languages.[5] A few other studies have revealed that there is a mismatch and discontinuity between the languages spoken by immigrant learners at home and those used at school, which affects immigrant learners' academic performance and educators' instructional practices.[6] This denotes that SA educators are often left with the responsibility to teach learners who do not speak or struggle to understand local languages. This is concerning, as SA educators are neither trained in nor given guidelines on how to teach and include immigrant learners who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Few existing studies on immigrant learners in the SA context have focused on the effects of xenophobia, identity loss, and general experiences of immigrant learners.[7] Little is known about educators' experiences of teaching immigrant learners in the FP, where all instructional practices should be employed in learners' mother tongues. Hence, this study seeks to explore FP educators' experiences of teaching English HL to immigrant learners by asking the following questions:

1. How do language barriers affect educators' instructional practices in English HL classrooms?
2. Do educators have the expertise to teach immigrant learners in the FP?
3. What challenges do educators encounter when teaching English HL to immigrants?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigrant learners in South African schools

Johannesburg is one of the most populous cities in the Gauteng province of South Africa and is known primarily for its trade and business. Johannesburg is not only known for its contribution to the country's

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[1] Michael M Kretzer, "Variations of Overt and Covert Language Practices of Educators in the North West Province: Case Study of the Use of Setswana and Sesotho at Primary and Secondary Schools," *South African Journal of African Languages* 36, no. 1 (June 28, 2016): 15–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2016.1186891; Department of Education (DoE), *Language in Education Policy* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1997).

[2] Saloshna Vandeyar and Theresa Catalano, "Language and Identity: Multilingual Immigrant Learners in South Africa," *Language Matters* 51, no. 2 (2020): 106–28; Department of Basic Education (DBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements: English Home Language: Foundation Phase Grades R–3* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2011)..

[3] Zanele Mtshali and Rivalani Xenon Masonto, "Teachers' Assessment Strategies for English Home Language Proficiency of Grade 1 Learners from Diverse Backgrounds," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research* 7, no. s1 (2025): a11–a11; Mzamani J Maluleke, "Exploring the Impact of Bilingual Education in the Foundation Phase in South Africa," *Issues in Educational Research* 33, no. 4 (2023): 1461–77; Kretzer, "Variations of Overt and Covert Language Practices of Educators in the North West Province: Case Study of the Use of Setswana and Sesotho at Primary and Secondary Schools."

[4] Zonke Ngema and Antoinette D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 44 (2024): 1–9; Vandeyar and Catalano, "Language and Identity: Multilingual Immigrant Learners in South Africa.".

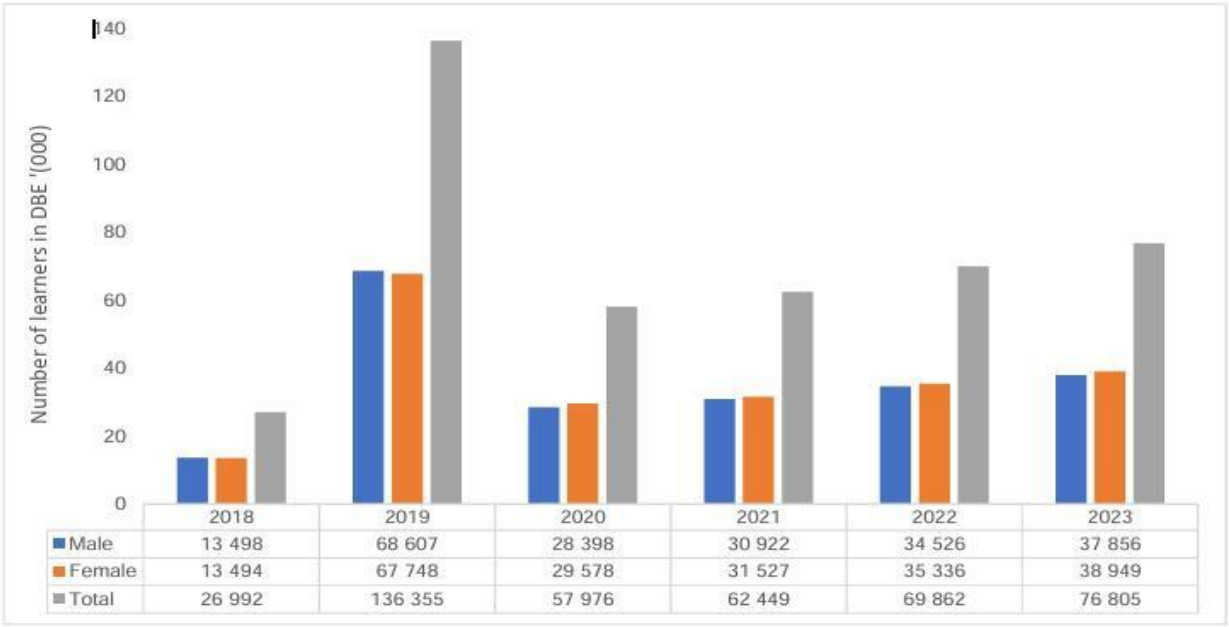
[5] Vusiwana C Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

[6] Ngema and D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa"; Matseke Alinah Marishane, *Capacity Building for Curriculum Differentiation in the Teaching of Foundation Phase Mathematics in Ngwaritsi Circuit, Limpopo Province* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2013).

[7] Ngema and D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa"; M T Babane, "The Sociolinguistic Drama of Language in A Multilingual South African Context," *Education and Development in Africa. Nairobi: CEDRED Publications* 266 (2023): 266–79; Farai Nyika and Debra Shepherd, "Impact of Internal Migration on School Enrollment and Completion Rates in South Africa," *African Human Mobility Review* 9, no. 1 (2023): 10–32; Vandeyar and Catalano, "Language and Identity: Multilingual Immigrant Learners in South Africa."

economy, but it is increasingly becoming home to most immigrants in SA, meaning that Gauteng is the preferred province of residence for most foreigners.[8] The overpopulation of immigrants is evident not only in many Johannesburg streets but also in schools in Johannesburg townships, which increasingly comprise more immigrant learners than South African learners. This implies that immigrant learners have become an integral part of the SA schooling system,[9] and the concept 'Immigrant learners' refers to learners who crossed borders at some point in their lives and are enrolled in an educational institution in host countries.[10]

According to Stats SA, the number of immigrant learners in SA has increased slightly over the past six years.[11] Surprisingly, they are still not accommodated in terms of their linguistic knowledge in the classroom. Instead, their languages remain excluded from the primary curriculum, presenting challenges for educators to integrate them into the teaching and learning process. Babane notes that accommodating immigrant learners in schools is a global issue due to various factors, including language barriers.[12]



	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Male	13 498	68 607	28 398	30 922	34 526	37 856
Female	13 494	67 748	29 578	31 527	35 336	38 949
Total	26 992	136 355	57 976	62 449	69 862	76 805

Source: Department of Basic Education

Figure 1: Statistical presentation of Immigrants enrolled in SA schools.

The increase in immigrant learners over the past few years, as shown in Figure 1, poses challenges for educators in schools, especially in the FP, as at this stage, most learners tend to communicate in their mother tongue, the language they are used to using at home. The challenge is that in schools, these learners struggle to understand educators' instructions, since in SA schools only SA languages are taught, and foreign languages are neither taught nor acknowledged, because most SA educators speak indigenous local languages that are not understood by foreign learners.[13]

A lack of recognition and knowledge of foreign languages among educators often leads to communication breakdowns in class and consequent social exclusion, as educators fail to teach and assist immigrant learners because they do not understand their languages.[14] Recent studies on immigrant

[8] Stats SA, *Statistical Release: Improving Lives through Data Ecosystem* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2022).
[9] V. N. Ngema, "Improving the Quality of Early Childhood Care and Education in Low-Income Communities: A PALAR Approach," 2024.
[10] Stats SA, *Migration Profile Report for South Africa: A Country Profile 2023* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2024).
[11] Stats SA, *Migration Profile Report for South Africa: A Country Profile 2023*.
[12] Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa."
[13] Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa"; Vandeyar and Catalano, "Language and Identity: Multilingual Immigrant Learners in South Africa."
[14] Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa."

learners in SA have revealed that there is language exclusion and discrimination against foreign languages, since even translanguaging practices that are used to explain complex concepts are in local languages and do not include foreign languages, leaving immigrant learners sidelined by educators' instructions.[15] This indicates that immigrant learners continue to suffer within the SA education context, although the SA constitution guarantees the right to basic education for all learners regardless of their country of origin, race, and ethnicity; however, immigrant learners are often excluded due to linguistic barriers and their inability to speak the language of instruction.[16]

Teaching English in SA classrooms amid immigrants

As mentioned, although the SA legislation promotes the right to education for all, immigrant learners often face tremendous challenges in acquiring the language used as LoLT in schools. In SA, the LoLT is English. For foreign learners, learning English poses challenges because it means learning two new languages simultaneously: their local indigenous language, which enables them to survive in their societies, and English as a Second Language. Babane notes that immigrants face challenges in learning two foreign languages simultaneously, which affects their cognitive development by interfering with meaning-making and learning, thereby inhibiting their class participation.

The SA (Language in Education Policy) LIEP is silent on teaching immigrant learners English and instead argues that learners' competence in their mother tongue will enable them to transfer the skills they have developed in that language when learning an additional language, such as English First Additional Language (EFAL).[17] This is because, in the SA education system, English is taken as a LoLT beyond the FP, and the assumption is that if learners are competent in their HL in the FP, they can learn and use English as a LoLT beyond the FP.

The most problematic factor is that the SA education system is silent on the teaching of English to immigrants. Instead, the focus is on English as an additional language as part of additive bilingualism,[18] implying that the SA curriculum does not address the needs of immigrant learners,[19] and this includes, but is not limited to, their language rights and access to the curriculum.

Systemic and Pedagogical challenges in teaching immigrant learners

Several challenges are associated with teaching immigrant learners, yet providing education to immigrants is of utmost importance given their increase in SA.[20] Unclear education policies, inadequate support, limited professional development, and limited resources are among the challenges educators teaching English in SA schools face.[21] The situation is exacerbated when the teaching of immigrant learners is involved, as educators are not trained or prepared for this, and teacher education programs focus on the local context and do not consider that SA multilingualism differs and is highly affected by immigration.[22]

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[15] Ngema and D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa"; Helen Hanna, "A Critical Review of International Research into Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs and Practices When Teaching Migrant Learners," *London Review of Education* 21, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.21; Ncamisile P Mthiyane and Sanelisiwe Mbhele, "'Are We Strangers in a Strange Context?': Schooling Experiences That Influence Immigrant Learners' Social Wellbeing in a Multilingual Primary School," *Journal of Educational Studies* 20, no. 1 (2021): 38–54; Vandeyar and Catalano, "Language and Identity: Multilingual Immigrant Learners in South Africa."

[16] Marishane, *Capacity Building for Curriculum Differentiation in the Teaching of Foundation Phase Mathematics in Ngwaritsi Circuit, Limpopo Province*.

[17] Roy Venketsamy and Zjing Hu, "Teachers as Change Agents: Teaching English First Additional Language in Schools in Gauteng," *Reading & Writing* 15, no. 1 (March 29, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/RW.v15i1.431.

[18] Luis Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms," in *Funds of Knowledge* (Routledge, 2006), 71–87.

[19] Hanna, "A Critical Review of International Research into Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs and Practices When Teaching Migrant Learners."

[20] Ngema and D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa."

[21] Mtshali and Masonto, "Teachers' Assessment Strategies for English Home Language Proficiency of Grade 1 Learners from Diverse Backgrounds"; Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa."

[22] Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa."

A study conducted by Babane in SA schools on the effect of the behaviour of immigrant learners in the FP,[23] revealed that educators and principals had challenges with the inclusion of immigrant learners in class since they are not only ill-equipped to teach English second- language speakers in English, but there is also a lack of clear policy guidelines from the CAPS on the pedagogical aspects of teaching English to immigrants.[24] Other studies have indicated that another challenge immigrant learners face in SA is that they often fail their school year due to their lack of understanding of the LoLT and difficulty in adapting to the SA education system.[25] These studies highlight the challenges that immigrant learners often face when enrolled in SA schools; however, none have explored educators' experiences in teaching immigrants, particularly in the FP. Therefore, this study seeks to address this area of interest, which has been overlooked in discussions of the education of immigrant learners in SA.

Research indicates that the challenges of teaching immigrant learners affect SA educators and constitute a global challenge, especially in countries affected by migration. A study conducted in Turkey revealed that when immigrant learners are enrolled in their classrooms, educators face several challenges, including language barriers, adaptation difficulties, and cultural differences between parents.[26] A similar study found that educators felt that the difficulties they encounter when teaching immigrant learners could be addressed through training and partnership with immigrant parents.[27] Although both studies were conducted outside the Global South, they reflect some current challenges faced by SA educators. This empirical study was conducted to understand current practices and develop feasible solutions to address existing challenges faced by FP educators teaching immigrants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was underpinned by Moll et al.'s funds of knowledge theory.[28] This theory recognizes the valuable experiential knowledge that learners bring to the classroom from home and assumes that families and communities are valuable educational resources.[29] This approach argues that there is an interconnection between the knowledge gained at home and that of the school. Therefore, the instructional practices of educators must value the knowledge that learners bring from home. For this study, funds of knowledge theory provided a lens to analyze whether the knowledge that immigrant learners bring to the classroom from home, encompassing linguistic, religious and cultural knowledge and experiences, is valued or silenced. This is because, in the South African context, the understanding is that learners are supposed to be taught in their home language in the FP and FP learners' home language tends to reflect their backgrounds.[30] Learners' engagement with the teacher in the classroom occurs through language, which reflects the knowledge they have acquired from their home environment.

The primary purpose of funds of knowledge is to develop innovations in teaching that draw on household knowledge.[31] However, in the current study, the question is whether this is possible when educators and learners do not share the same reality. Hence, using funds of knowledge as a theoretical lens enabled the exploration of the insights and experiences of educators in teaching immigrant learners and the challenges they encounter in doing so. This theory also allowed the researchers to enquire

[23] Babane, "How Language Challenges Affect the Behaviour of Immigrant Learners in the Foundation Phase at Three Schools in Gauteng, South Africa."
[24] Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms."
[25] Ngema and D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa."
[26] Valentina Carbonara, Andrea Scibetta, and Jacopo Torregrossa, "The Benefits of Multilingual Pedagogies for Multilingual Children's Narrative Abilities," *International Journal of Multilingualism* 21, no. 2 (2024): 645–69.
[27] Tatenda Chidau, Risimati M. Khosa, and Magaret Phillips, "Effects of Successful Business Practices on Business Performance: Evidence from Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Ekurhuleni, South Africa," *The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management* 14, no. 1 (March 31, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v14i1.490.
[28] Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms."
[29] Margaret Maja, "Using ICT-Based Pedagogy to Teach English First Additional Language during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Rural Case Study," *Teacher Education through Flexible Learning in Africa (TETFLE)* 4 (2023).
[30] Department of Basic Education (DBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements: English Home Language: Foundation Phase Grades R–3*.
[31] Maja, "Using ICT-Based Pedagogy to Teach English First Additional Language during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Rural Case Study."

whether immigrant learners were allowed to use all their linguistic repertoires and draw on their experiences, which included foreign languages, during an English lesson.

Furthermore, this theory emphasises transforming educators' practices by allowing them to develop inclusive instruction and argues that human beings and their social worlds are inseparable.[32] That is, funds of knowledge make a direct link between students' lives and classroom instruction.[33] Applying it in this study allowed the researcher to investigate whether educators recognized that interconnection. This theoretical lens provided a systematic way to interrogate educators' experiences of teaching immigrant learners in the FP, a crucial phase in a learner's educational life in SA, as it is the entry phase of schooling and where most learners tend to rely on their home languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which allows researchers to study participants in their natural context and gain a deep insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.[34] Within this approach, a multiple-case study design was employed, in which three cases were studied separately and compared to understand the experiences of FP educators teaching English HL to immigrant learners. A qualitative research approach includes multiple case studies, which allow researchers to conduct a cross-case analysis and examine the comparative dynamics of multiple cases, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.[35]

Purposive sampling was used to select six participants. To be selected, participants had to teach English HL to immigrant learners in the FP. As a result, educators teaching in schools located within the Johannesburg Central Business District (CBD) were selected, since that is where most immigrant learners were enrolled. Most immigrant learners were concentrated in the CBD of Johannesburg, as many of their parents operated businesses in the city.[36] Although other surrounding schools in Johannesburg had immigrant learners, most offered English as a First Additional Language (FAL); hence, the researcher excluded those schools and only included those offering English as HL as early as the FP. To gather data from the educators, semi- structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted with each of the six educators to understand their experiences in teaching English HL to immigrant learners in the FP.

All responses were captured during the interviews using a recording device and later transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was then conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step process of data analysis.[37] The researchers became familiar with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts and field notes. The initial codes were grouped based on their similar patterns. The analysis used an inductive coding method, allowing themes to emerge from the data. The related codes were grouped into broad categories, reviewed, and refined into coherent themes. The themes were first verified against the original data to ensure that they accurately reflected the experiences of the participants.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data collected from participants, the researcher conducted member checking, where transcripts were taken back to participants for validation to enable participants to determine that the transcribed data was a true reflection of their views, since member checking includes going back to the participant to verify the accuracy of the results derived from interviews.[38] All participants provided their informed consent, and data were collected in accordance with the ethical

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[32] Maja, "Using ICT-Based Pedagogy to Teach English First Additional Language during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Rural Case Study."

[33] Maja, "Using ICT-Based Pedagogy to Teach English First Additional Language during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Rural Case Study."

[34] Emma Adams et al., "A Qualitative Study Exploring Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Support among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness during COVID-19," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 6 (March 15, 2022): 3459, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063459.

[35] Camilla Louise Scanlan, *Preparing for the Unanticipated: Challenges in Conducting Semi-Structured, in-Depth Interviews* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020).

[36] Chidau, Khosa, and Phillips, "Effects of Successful Business Practices on Business Performance: Evidence from Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Ekurhuleni, South Africa."

[37] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. ," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

[38] Rasheedah O. Adams-Ojugbele and Dipane Hlalele, "Sustainable Learning for Refugee Children in South African Primary Schools: A Theoretical Approach," *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 17, no. 1 (October 29, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v17i1.1062.

standards of the university. The ethical standards suggested by Lincoln and Guba were upheld, including participant consent, where participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time, and confidentiality, where participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities.[39]

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the data collected from the participants, which address the research questions: the effect of language barriers in the English HL classroom, the lack of educators' expertise in teaching immigrant learners, and the challenges encountered by educators when teaching English HL to immigrant learners in the FP.

This section presents the findings of the research paper in accordance with the aforementioned themes. These findings reveal the current situation facing SA FP educators in teaching English HL to immigrant learners. The educators revealed that they encounter challenges when teaching immigrants because of linguistic barriers, lack of expertise, and lack of support from both parents and the government.

The effect of language barriers in the English HL classroom

This study revealed that educators were not teaching English HL to learners who spoke only local indigenous languages; instead, in their classrooms, some learners spoke foreign languages, which led to linguistic barriers within the classroom because not all languages that the learners spoke were included in the mainstream curriculum and the schools' language policy. The following were some of the responses recorded when educators were asked whether they were familiar with all the languages spoken by their learners in the classroom:

> *No, not at all, because some of my learners are foreigners, coming from Nigeria and mostly from Zimbabwe, so they speak languages that I am unfamiliar with* (Ms Ndlela).

Ms Ndlela's responses clearly indicate that she was not familiar with all the languages spoken by the learners in her classroom, since she was also teaching learners who were coming from neighboring countries. This means that the effect of globalization and social mobility has had a considerable impact even in the classroom, where it has become the norm for educators to teach foreign-born learners, although educators were not familiar with those languages. Learners from foreign countries did not leave their languages outside the school premises, even though they were attending SA schools that did not recognize those languages.

Mrs Naidoo provided a similar response:

> *In my class, I do not know all the languages that these learners speak because, like this year, I have one learner from Zimbabwe who speaks Shona, which is her home language, and I do not think she understands English because she does not respond when I speak with her. The problem is that I also do not speak her language, so you can see the challenge I face. For that reason, I stick to English and tell her to watch what others are doing.*

Mrs. Naidoo's response highlights the challenges she typically faces in her classroom due to linguistic barriers affecting immigrant learners and how this has led to learners being withdrawn from participating in class. This situation often results in poor academic achievement and social exclusion for immigrant learners. This was also noted in Ms. Sebeko's response when she stated the following*:*

> *It is a pity that these learners find themselves in our schools where they become helpless both in class and during breaktime. You will find that some struggle even to make friends, because their peers do not understand them when they speak, but there is absolutely nothing that we can do as teachers, especially in class, because we are instructed to teach in English, and nothing is*

[39] Yvonna S Lincoln and Egon G Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (sage, 1985).

presented in foreign languages. So, to be quite honest, there is not much that we do to accommodate them.

The overarching response from educators was that some of the learners they taught spoke unfamiliar languages and were from foreign countries, and including them in their classroom instruction was a mystery, as linguistic barriers often hindered immigrant learners from gaining academic knowledge due to a lack of understanding of the LoLT. Educators also revealed that in such instances, monolingual practices were sufficient because they were unable to code-switch, as they did not share the local languages with the learners. These findings align with the existing literature, which indicates that immigrants often struggle with learning local languages, which in turn affects their social interaction abilities.

These responses to challenges caused by linguistic barriers led to a follow-up question regarding how educators catered to the languages spoken by immigrant learners during the English lesson. In response to this question, Ms. Ngcobo stated that:

With local indigenous languages, I try to code-switch whenever possible. Since I grew up in Soweto, where most of these languages are spoken, I can understand learners who draw on local indigenous languages during a lesson. However, learning foreign languages is not easy, and I think learners are aware of that because I have never heard them speak any of those languages in class.

Ms. Ngcobo's response indicates that immigrant learners often suffer both academic and social exclusion because even current policies that are meant to advance all languages do not include them, as they are based on catering for SA learners who are speakers of indigenous languages. These results clearly indicate that immigrant learners' rights remain violated in classrooms where their languages are not recognized and acknowledged, since they do not enjoy similar privileges as their counterparts who speak local indigenous languages, and since foreign languages are excluded from the curriculum.

In support of Ms Ngocobo's statement, Ms Ndlela further added:

Surprisingly, these learners know that in class, where it is academically oriented, they are supposed to speak English; otherwise, I do not understand what they are saying. So, they are somewhat compelled to learn how to speak English. They know that I will not be able to assist them if they tell me things in their home language, as I do not understand foreign languages.

Similarly, Ms Gumede added that:

There is no way I can accommodate them, as I do not understand their home language. Therefore, in my class, I stick to English, since most of the learners are from other African countries. I do not understand their language, so I am forced to speak only English, and they must respond in the same language. Unfortunately, as a result, some students are withdrawn from participating in the class because they do not understand the language of instruction.

The above responses from Ms Ndlela and Ms Gumede reveal that immigrant learners' languages are excluded from the SA curriculum, which was noted when the educators mentioned that they did not accommodate immigrant learners in their classroom, since they were not familiar with their home languages and, as a result, immigrant learners were often withdrawn from participating in their classroom and did not receive assistance from the educators if they spoke in their home languages. This entails that educators' practices infringe on immigrant learners' access to the curriculum. Educators cannot be solely blamed for this infringement since the current practice implementation of the SA language policy excludes foreign learners from accessing the curriculum in a familiar language, as it recognizes SA official languages and thus leads to limited epistemic access and imposes new identities on immigrants since they are coerced to learn in an unfamiliar language and are not allowed to draw on their linguistic repertoires when they learn.

Concurrent with educators' responses were field notes from classroom observations, which revealed that in the sampled schools, most learners were either Congolese or Nigerian and spoke French

at home, whilst at school, they learnt in English. These learners were observed to have difficulties understanding the instructions of their educators, as their translation practices in class excluded their native languages. Educators were also faced with challenges in ensuring that the immigrant learners understood the content, since most were still learning English and did not understand the vernacular languages in which the teacher translated. These findings suggest that linguistic barriers negatively impact instructional practices for educators and immigrant learners, who often suffer as a result. The researcher observed that educators faced tremendous challenges not only with learners but also with parents, as there were many instances of communication breakdown between educators and parents, especially when the teacher attempted to communicate the learner's progress. Overall, the linguistic barriers had a substantial adverse effect on both learners and teachers. Still, educators suffered since learners were not performing well in their classroom, and they had to think of intervention strategies to constantly assist them.

Lack of expertise in teaching immigrant learners

Educator participants in this study revealed that, due to the superdiversity in their classrooms, they were compelled to adopt monolingual practices in their teaching, in which they used English only, as even translanguaging practices did not benefit immigrant learners. They were unsure how to accommodate the languages spoken by the learners in their classroom, which were not indigenous local languages. These findings led the researcher to ask how the educators adapted their teaching strategies to support immigrant learners with limited English proficiency and local languages in their classroom, and these were some of the responses from educators:

> *I only use English. If they do not understand, I try to use a different method, such as showing them a picture with an English subtitle. So, you see the language does not change, because switching to local indigenous languages causes more confusion for them* (Ms Sebeko).

Ms Sebeko's response indicated that using a picture method seems to be the only solution for her when teaching a class with immigrant learners, because in most cases, when learners struggle with English, switching to indigenous languages further disadvantages them, as they struggle to comprehend information presented in them. In support of her statement, Ms Ndlela added that:

> *You know it is not easy here in the foundation phase, because sometimes you will find that the concepts are too abstract for learners to understand. They need a mother tongue jargon to process the concepts, which is where I tend to feel hopeless, since I cannot switch or explain things in any foreign language. In such instances, immigrant learners in my class become excluded, and they end up getting lower grades*.

Ms Ndlela's comment implies that she faces difficulties in assisting immigrant learners due to her lack of linguistic and cultural understanding, which prevents her from tapping into their existing language resources during instruction. When teaching certain concepts, learners often require explanations using familiar mother-tongue terminology to facilitate understanding. However, because she was not familiar with the home languages of learners, she indicated that she was unable to provide linguistic assistance to immigrants in her class. This finding, from a funds of knowledge perspective, shows that the educator was aware of and valued learners' home languages as valuable intellectual and cultural assets that can enhance conceptual understanding; however, due to her lack of understanding of the foreign languages, she could not tap into learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge during the lesson. The Theory of Funds of Knowledge posits that students bring accumulated experiences, knowledge, skills, language, and culture from their homes and neighborhoods to the classroom, where these resources should be integrated into the learning process to promote a deeper understanding of the subject.[40]

In support of Ms Ndlela's comment, Ms Ngcobo further raised the following:

[40] Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms"; Norma González et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching," 2005.

My limited knowledge and understanding of foreign languages have had a profoundly negative impact on my learners, especially during English lessons, because when a child is lost, I am unable to assist them effectively. After all, even code-switching to local indigenous languages can exacerbate the issue, as this is still in the FP, and you will find that these learners speak their home languages at home and are not familiar with either English or any local indigenous languages.

Ms. Ngcobo's response echoed Ms Ndlela's concern that educators have limited expertise in the home languages of immigrant learners. This constraint further complicates the effective implementation of multilingual pedagogical methods by extending its impact beyond communication, as many immigrant learners are unfamiliar with the local African languages that educators frequently use to support learners in English instruction in the FP. These results echoed the research by Moll et al. and González et al., which found a discrepancy between the linguistic resources that immigrant students bring from home and those recognized and utilized in the school environment. [41]

A lack of accommodation for immigrant learners' languages was also observed in a grade 3 class during an oral English HL lesson. The activity was called 'show and tell,' where learners were expected to bring in their favorite item from home, show it to their classmates, and explain why it was their favorite.

The researcher observed that one learner who attempted to tell her classmate about her favorite item was stopped when she started speaking in French, and the learner had to sit down, with disappointment written on her face. How the teacher treated her presentation differed from how she treated the other classmates who used local languages when they were telling their stories. Observing this scenario, the researchers engaged with the educator to ask why the cases were treated differently, and this response was recorded.

You see, I do not understand French, so I am afraid that if I allow her to continue speaking in French, I will not be able to translate what she says to the rest of the class. Unlike those who code-switch to local languages, it is not a challenge because these learners come from townships where all these languages are spoken (Ms. Gumede).

Ms. Gumede's justification revealed that the lack of expertise of educators largely affects learners and often leads to unjust practices that sideline and rob them of the opportunity to experience education just as their peers. From the observation, it was clear that the main issue was the language the learner used during an oral activity, which led to her being excluded from full class participation, whereas her peers enjoyed the privilege of using the same local languages.

These findings are not a surprise, especially since the policy (CAPS) does advocate for learners to be taught in their mother tongue in the FP,[42] and it is supported by linguistic theory that argues that proficiency in L1 can be transferable to L2 since there is a common underlying proficiency. [43] Nevertheless, in this case, both the policy and linguistic theories that guide the teaching of languages were ignored, as learners' L1 did not facilitate their understanding of the targeted language (L2), and there was miscommunication between learners and the teacher. These findings indicate a need for changing practices in teacher education programs and for educators to be prepared to adapt to a changing classroom environment by adopting socially just pedagogies that will not exclude or marginalise learners based on the languages they speak. The time is ripe for the education system to adopt multilingual pedagogies in response to the multilingual realities that educators face in the classroom, where learners'

[41] Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms"; Abdul-Nasser El-Kassar et al., "Doing Well by Doing Good: Why Is Investing in University Social Responsibility a Good Business for Higher Education Institutions Cross Culturally?," *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management* 30, no. 1 (February 8, 2023): 142–65, https://doi.org/10.1108/CCSM-12-2021-0233.

[42] Department of Basic Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): Foundation Phase Grades R–3* (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2011).

[43] Jim Cummins, "Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency, Linguistic Interdependence, the Optimum Age Question and Some Other Matters. Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 19.," 1979.

linguistic repertoires are viewed as a resource rather than a threat in multilingual classrooms.[44] Meaning educators must affirm learners' multilingual identities by allowing them to draw on their linguistic repertoires when they learn, since the teaching of languages should address the new reality we are confronted with through relevant pedagogic approaches that will allow multilingual learners to use the full range of their linguistic repertoires to generate and communicate meaning, even in restrictive monolingual learning environments, since there is a 'common underlying [language] proficiency' whereby multiple languages interact and develop, supporting the overall cognitive functioning of bilinguals.[45]

Challenges encountered by educators when teaching English HL to immigrants

The above findings on withdrawn participation leading to academic exclusion of immigrant learners caused by linguistic barriers and lack of expertise from educators to teach immigrant learners led to the question of whether there were any other challenges associated with teaching English HL to immigrant learners, and, more importantly, whether there were any measures put in place to mitigate those challenges. The following responses were recorded from educators:

> *There is a notable lack of parental involvement and support. You will find that when we assign homework to these learners, they often do not complete it, meaning that the English we teach them is only reinforced here at school and nowhere else, because even some parents do not understand it. So, yes, it is very tricky and challenging* (Ms Gumede).

Ms Gumede raised a critical finding: the lack of parental involvement also poses significant challenges for educators, particularly when teaching immigrant learners, as these learners' language-learning skills are not supported beyond the school environment. This was noted when Ms Gumede highlighted that learners sometimes come to school without having written their homework. This lack of parental involvement in learners' education poses a significant challenge, as parental involvement plays a crucial role in language learning, influencing learners' attitudes towards learning a language and their overall academic performance.[46] In relation to Ms Gumede's response, Mrs Naidoo raised that:

> *The most challenging part of teaching immigrant learners is that the government is aware that they are enrolled in our schools, but they have not even once trained us on how to include them when we teach, although they always speak of inclusive policies.*

Mrs Naidoo's response to challenges was broad. However, it indicates that the government must act to mitigate the challenges educators and learners face, especially by ensuring that the policy is inclusive of immigrant learners. Seeko and Mathebula note that although the SA frameworks advocate inclusive policies, substantial gaps remain in their implementation, particularly in support for immigrant learners.[47] In conformity with the above responses, in one school, few traces of code-switching practices were observed, both in class and during playtime, because most learners enrolled in that school were children of immigrants. Code-switching to local indigenous languages did not assist them, as learners were still in the FP and relied more on their HL.

DISCUSSION

This article aimed to investigate the experiences educators in the Foundation Phase face when teaching immigrant learners, a significant part of the South African schooling system due to globalization and social mobility. To achieve this, empirical data were collected from educators through semi-structured

[44] Caroline Kerfoot and Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenbergen, "Language in Epistemic Access: Mobilising Multilingualism and Literacy Development for More Equitable Education in South Africa," *Language and Education* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 177–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994522; Cummins, "Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency, Linguistic Interdependence, the Optimum Age Question and Some Other Matters. Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 19."

[45] Lina Feng and Yuhuan Tan, "Understanding the Impact of Parental Involvement Subtypes on Chinese Preschool Children's Language Ability," *Current Psychology* 42, no. 35 (2023): 31434–47.

[46] Limakatso Seeko and Thokozani Mathebula, "Democracy and Inclusive Education Policy in Post-1994 South African Schools: Goal, Tension, and Struggle," *Educational Research for Social Change* 12, no. 2 (October 27, 2023): 114–29, https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a8.

[47] Seeko and Mathebula, "Democracy and Inclusive Education Policy in Post-1994 South African Schools: Goal, Tension, and Struggle."

interviews, with the aim of understanding the lived experiences of FP educators and drawing inferences from educators' data on the current reality of educators in schools where immigrant learners are enrolled, particularly in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. This study revealed that immigrant learners enter English home language classes with a wealth of linguistic, cultural, and experiential knowledge, as described by the Funds of Knowledge perspective,[48] which can enhance learning. This study revealed a contradiction between the asset-based assumptions of the funds of knowledge theory and classroom practices that persistently promote English as the sole valid language of learning. The learners' home languages and lived experiences were largely overlooked, despite their potential to enhance literacy development and classroom participation, because educators lacked expertise in foreign languages.

The results of this study indicated that educators currently face tremendous challenges in the classroom due to linguistic barriers, a lack of expertise in teaching immigrant learners, and insufficient support from parents and the Department of Basic Education to teach such learners. These findings align with the global literature on the challenges faced by educators teaching refugees English, suggesting that linguistic challenges and a lack of preparation affect English educators. Refugees are individuals who have migrated to another country.[49] This study also indicated that educators were unfamiliar with the languages that learners spoke in their classrooms. These findings conformed with the literature, which indicates that SA multilingualism includes not only recognized SA languages but also foreign languages, a phenomenon driven by globalization, which has also affected school enrollment. [50]

The study's findings reflect contextual factors unique to South African schools, including curriculum requirements, large class sizes, and the ongoing prioritization of English as the dominant language. Contextual constraints may hinder educators from fully utilizing funds of knowledge, even though they acknowledge its potential benefits. Previous research, including studies by Hogg and Esteban-Guitart and Moll, has indicated that Funds of Knowledge approaches enhance learner participation and academic engagement.[51] Educators encountered difficulties applying these principles in situations involving immigrant students due to a disparity in linguistic and cultural knowledge between educators and students in the context studied. This finding suggests that recognizing learners' diverse backgrounds does not automatically lead to pedagogical practices that leverage those resources, highlighting the gap between theoretical awareness and classroom implementation.

These findings have significant implications for South African multilingual education. Language policies that promote multilingualism and linguistic inclusion are often not fully implemented in classroom settings. Educators need greater institutional support, professional development, and curriculum guidance to effectively incorporate the linguistic and cultural assets of immigrant students into English home language instruction. Without such support, multilingual classrooms risk reproducing deficit perspectives that position home languages as obstacles rather than educational assets. Therefore, multilingual education at the policy level should go beyond acknowledging linguistic diversity to also offer practical guidance on implementing culturally responsive teaching methods. Curriculum documents and assessment frameworks should explicitly encourage educators to draw on learners' Funds of Knowledge to support learning English as a home language, especially in increasingly diverse classrooms, affected by migration.

Teacher education programs should incorporate funds of knowledge as a practical pedagogical framework rather than merely a theoretical concept. School management teams should also create inclusive school environments that value linguistic and cultural diversity by establishing collaborative professional learning communities where educators can share effective teaching methods for immigrant students. Educators should have access to ongoing professional development opportunities in schools

[48] Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms."
[49] Sive Makeleni, "Tongue-Tied: Language-Based Exclusion at a South African University," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Sociality Studies* 4 (2024): 1–12.
[50] Ngema and D'amant, "Implementation of Inclusive Education as Experienced by Immigrant Learners of Diverse Backgrounds in South Africa"; Vandeyar and Catalano, "Language and Identity: Multilingual Immigrant Learners in South Africa."
[51] Linda Hogg, "Funds of Knowledge: An Investigation of Coherence within the Literature," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27, no. 3 (2011): 666–77; Moisès Esteban-Guitart and Luis C Moll, "Funds of Identity: A New Concept Based on the Funds of Knowledge Approach," *Culture & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (March 5, 2014): 31–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X13515934.

that promote family and community engagement and equip educators with knowledge of their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

This study examined educators' experiences in teaching English HL to immigrant students in classrooms that are both linguistically and culturally diverse, using the funds of knowledge theory as a framework. This study aimed to understand how educators navigated the opportunities and challenges of teaching students whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds diverged from those commonly represented in English home language classrooms.

Educators acknowledged the growing linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms but struggled to effectively meet the educational needs of immigrant students. The challenges encompassed language barriers, limited preparation for multilingual classrooms, and lack of parental involvement. Participants recognized the value of learners' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, yet these resources were not consistently integrated into classroom instruction. Learners' knowledge funds were frequently underutilized to support English language learning and classroom participation.

This article has revealed that educators' hands remain tied because policy guides their pedagogical instruction, and professional development focusing on teaching immigrant learners remains scarce in South Africa, causing linguistic barriers for both learners and educators. The lack of educators' expertise in teaching English to immigrant learners as curriculum implementers is a challenge that needs to be addressed through empirical studies that focus on classroom experiences and practice.

This study contributes to scholarship by extending the understanding of how Funds of Knowledge theory can illuminate the experiences of educators in multilingual English home language classrooms. Recognizing the learners' cultural and linguistic resources alone is insufficient without adequate institutional support, teacher preparation, and curriculum guidance that enable educators to translate these resources into meaningful pedagogical practices. The study also contributes to ongoing discussions on multilingual education by highlighting the importance of approaches that view the experiences of immigrant learners as valuable assets rather than as a challenge.

This study also has social implications for marginalized children, particularly immigrants who are currently excluded by the LIEP in South Africa. The LIEP does not cover children of immigrants; therefore, there is a lack of parental involvement because parents also struggle with the official languages in schools. This article sought to address the issue of quality education in SA, arguing that immigrant learners are marginalized because their languages are excluded from the curriculum, hindering their epistemic access and academic performance. Hence, this study recommends that education stakeholders provide in-service training for educators to assist them in mitigating the challenges of teaching immigrant learners. In-service training for educators can be facilitated by equipping both in-service educators and teacher education programs with ways to use multilingual pedagogies, as they are non-discriminatory and allow learners to use their full linguistic repertoires to access the curriculum.

Recommendations for future research

This study recommends that future research expand beyond the FP and study a larger population, including learners outside Gauteng province, to examine the broader impact of excluding immigrant learners from the mainstream curriculum and how this affects their academic achievement and emotional well-being. A broader extension of this topic nationwide would enable SA education authorities to investigate ways to restructure their education policies to include marginalized groups, who constitute a considerable part of the SA population.

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