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BRIDGING THE SILENCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON ENGLISH-SPEAKING CHALLENGES IN UNDER-RESOURCED SOUTH AFRICAN CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Although most students speak an African language as their first language, English has taken over as the primary language of instruction in South African schools. Particularly in settings with limited resources, this mismatch between the home language and the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) poses ongoing difficulties. This study explores the challenges influencing the development of English-speaking skills among learners and teachers in two under-resourced primary schools in the Buffalo City District of South Africa. In multilingual classrooms, where English is used as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), both learners and teachers experience significant difficulty, particularly in the Intermediate Phase as a critical stage of language and academic transition. Using a qualitative research design, the study collected data through teacher interviews and learner focus groups, with participants selected using purposive sampling. The findings revealed that several interrelated factors hinder English oral proficiency: the shortage of qualified English teachers, limited learner motivation, insufficient speaking and instructional strategies in the classrooms, and frequent teacher code-switching practices. Code-switching, while often necessary for comprehension, was found to limit consistent exposure to English. The study underscores the need for targeted professional development to equip teachers with effective strategies for fostering spoken English in multilingual, resource-constrained settings. Encouraging English use in classroom interactions may gradually enhance both learners' fluency and teachers' instructional confidence. The study contributes to the broader discourse on equitable language education in disadvantaged primary schools.

Keywords: Code-switching, English speaking skills, Language of learning and teaching (LoLT), Learner's motivation, Multilingual classrooms, Under-Resourced

1. Introduction

Developing English proficiency among South African learners has long been a significant challenge for the government, particularly through the Ministry of Education. This difficulty stems from the need to meet both national and international expectations while addressing the unique linguistic realities of the country. English serves as a lingua franca for socio-economic, cultural, political, and educational purposes, yet many learners struggle to master it. According to Tshuma and Le Cordeur (2019), approximately 90% of learners in South African public schools use English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). South Africa now has 12 official languages: the original 11 spoken languages (English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, isiNdebele, SiSwati, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga) plus South African Sign Language. However, only English and Afrikaans, two of South Africa's eleven official languages, are used as mediums of instruction, even though these languages are spoken by a minority of the population.

In South Africa, children are typically taught in their mother tongue during the foundational years (Grades R–3), after which they transition to English as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onward. This linguistic shift often creates significant challenges for fourth graders, many of whom struggle to adapt to learning in English. As a result, teachers frequently rely on code-switching to explain new concepts, clarify questions, or emphasize key points. Hussein, Saed, and Haider (2020) note that code-switching also helps teachers connect with students' backgrounds and experiences. However, despite these efforts, both teachers and learners often show little enthusiasm for engaging in English-speaking activities, perpetuating a cycle of disengagement.

Mweli (2018) highlights that many Grade 4 teachers prefer to teach African learners in their native languages. This preference contrasts with practices in other regions, such as Botswana, where Setswana is used as the primary language of instruction for the first two grades, with English introduced later. Despite this approach, Tswana learners often face difficulties in achieving basic English fluency (Chebanne & van Pinxteren, 2021). These language barriers hinder effective communication and contribute to poor performance in English-speaking lessons (Nkome, 2015). Chebanne and van Pinxteren (2021) further argue that educators play a crucial role in these challenges, as they are central to the language acquisition process.

The challenges extend beyond South Africa. Shilongo (2007) notes that in rural Namibian schools, both teachers and learners face significant obstacles when transitioning from native languages to English as the medium of instruction. These findings underscore the widespread nature of English proficiency difficulties across Sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa, adherence to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is mandatory. CAPS assumes that both learners and educators are proficient in English starting in Grade 4, with code-switching allowed only when necessary. However, in practice, both teachers and students frequently use their mother tongues inside and outside the classroom, reflecting the linguistic realities of their communities. Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018) emphasize that learners in these contexts rarely speak English outside the classroom, whether at home or in their communities. This limited exposure further hampers their ability to develop English-speaking skills. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the factors influencing English language proficiency among teachers and learners in under-resourced South African primary schools.

Although English-speaking challenges in South African schools have been widely documented, much of the existing research remains either policy-focused or literacy-oriented, with limited empirical attention to oral language development during the critical Grade 4 transition in under-resourced rural contexts. Moreover, few studies examine the reciprocal relationship between teacher language practices and learner speaking experiences within a single analytical frame. This study addresses this gap by offering a theoretically grounded, qualitative analysis of how instructional practices, teacher proficiency, and contextual constraints collectively shape English-speaking development. In doing so, the study advances current scholarship by foregrounding spoken language as a central mechanism through which educational inequality is reproduced or mitigated in multilingual classrooms.

Statement of the problem

In South Africa, where English is a First Additional Language (EFAL) for many students, being able to communicate effectively orally in English is essential for both academic success and social engagement. Many Grades 4 EFAL students in underprivileged primary schools find it difficult to acquire sufficient speaking proficiency, despite its significance (Howie et al., 2021). According to the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 81% of Grade 4 students in South Africa were unable to read for meaning, a basic ability that is strongly related to the development of oral language (Spaull, 2023). Learners' capacity to communicate effectively in English is severely hampered by this lack of foundational language skills. Research conducted in Eastern Cape township and rural school's shows that teachers frequently lack confidence when speaking English. Additionally, the problem addressed in this study is not merely learners' limited English-speaking ability, but the systemic misalignment between language policy expectations and classroom realities in under-resourced schools. While policy assumes English proficiency among both teachers and learners from Grade 4 onward, classroom practices reveal constrained instructional capacity, uneven scaffolding, and restricted opportunities for meaningful oral interaction. For example, recent research by Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) found that in a multilingual township primary school that had adopted an English medium of instruction, English was not the dominant language in learners' everyday interactions and many teachers struggled to use English effectively as the LoLT, conditions that limited the success of the policy in practice. This misalignment constitutes a structural and pedagogical problem with implications for equity, access, and long-term academic achievement, thereby warranting in-depth empirical investigation.

Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence the development of English-speaking skills among learners and teachers in two selected primary schools within the Buffalo City District in South Africa.

Main research question:

What strategies do teachers use to promote English-speaking skills in Grade 4 English First Additional Language learners?

Sub-research question:

- What factors impede the achievement of English-speaking skills perceived by teachers and learners in disadvantaged primary schools?

Significance of the study

The child is an important part of society, and the South African constitution stipulates that every child has the right to an education. As a result, the heart of every child's learning has been a significant educational focus for a long time (Malik, 2018). Curriculum planners, education professionals, English subject advisers, principals, English teachers, parents, and decision-making bodies might find the study useful in designing English-speaking policies. This may also be beneficial to Grade 4 EFAL learners in terms of developing a culture of English speaking in the classroom during their lessons.

Literature review

Rather than treating teacher shortages, learner motivation, vocabulary deficits, and socio-economic constraints as isolated variables, this review conceptualises them as interdependent factors operating within a shared sociocultural learning environment. Drawing on Vygotskian theory, the literature is synthesised to demonstrate how limited mediation, reduced linguistic input, and constrained interactional opportunities cumulatively restrict learners' oral language development in English.

The importance of English as a global language

The English language's pervasiveness has sparked a growing academic dispute about the language's function in current world society. At least two perspectives on its global role have emerged: one, its purported 'imperialistic' or 'hegemonic' effect, and the other, its ostensibly 'neutral' or 'functional' capability (Beck, 2018). Regardless of one's viewpoint in the dispute, there have been numerous and insistent requests for a more thorough and critical awareness of English's role in contemporary society (Sifakis, 2019). The case of South Africa states that sanctioned and enforced language policies are also visible in the history of 'outer circle countries,' where they have often accompanied developments in trade, commerce, education, and law (Kachru, 1996). As Kachru (1996) explains, the link to linguistic imperialism is established through an asymmetric verbal relationship between natives and non-natives, which eventually becomes enshrined in the governmental machinery and functions. Such societal changes initiate a process of absorption, which is 'internalized as natural, normal, and essential' by the native population, who are the language's later producers and consumers (Bhatt, 2001, p. 532). Another way to look at English's current presence globally is to include ex-colonial languages (French et al., and even Spanish, which is currently gaining speakers), where English has far outperformed as a lingua franca. To say that this is simply a legacy of colonialism does not entirely explain or account for English's contemporary presence; alternatively, it could lead to the conclusion that English is a unique or special language and that its expansion is due to its intrinsic strengths.

Limited qualified teachers

According to Richard (2011, p. 27), "English language instruction is not a subject that everyone who can speak English can accomplish." It is a subject-specific profession that necessitates academic education and practical practice. It entails professional development and certification in order to establish standards for English language instruction and for teachers who teach English in the classroom. A shortage of qualified educators exists, as many find it challenging to effectively convey academic content to Grade 4 learners and depend heavily on code-switching (Evans & Nthulana, 2018). This is the most significant and underappreciated issue. Many populations are English language learners, and they have no way of knowing who a competent English teacher is and who is not; therefore, everything the instructor says, whether correct or erroneous, will be considered as correct by the learners (Villegas et al., 2018). As a result, primary schools in rural areas are likely to continue to struggle with the teaching of English as a Second Language. Grade 4s, where the medium of instruction changes to English due to a shortage of trained teachers, are far from obtaining this speaking skill, as proven by research thus far. In the context of South Africa, Holmqvist (2019) claims that there is a need for 20 000 - 30 000 new qualified teachers each year in South Africa, with only a third being produced in 2011 so far. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), countries will need to hire 68.8 million teachers in the next 14 years to provide primary and secondary education to every child: 24.4 million primary school teachers and 44.4 million secondary school teachers. There is a shortage of skilled teachers in South Africa, as evidenced by the above assertions and other scholars (UNESCO, 2016). Thus, if only teachers are available and there are techniques to develop learners' speaking abilities, then entire attention to an individual learner regarding speaking activities may be successful. However, the essential staff member who initiates improvement methods is often the one who speaks the least.

The English vocabulary deficit

Foreign language learners must have a wide range of vocabulary as it helps them communicate effectively in the target language (Abrar et al., 2018). The lack of English vocabulary is arguably the most significant barrier that learners confront, affecting all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Learners face substantial obstacles due to a lack of vocabulary, particularly in listening and speaking abilities (Hill et al., 2018). In this regard, learners will not be able to properly grasp a second language until the key driver's vocabulary is mastered to their satisfaction. According to Fesi (2018), in her study, vocabulary is a crucial factor that hampers students' proficiency in English as a Foreign Language. Fesi (2018) further stated that similarly, teachers who are expected to lead lessons yet lack proficiency in the language of learning and teaching are likely to have a negative impact on the learners' English-speaking abilities. This means that the anxieties about learning English will not be realized. Teachers must pay close attention to linguistic vocabulary when they apply the language of learning and teaching as necessary during Grade 4 classes.

Motivational deficit

Learners' motivation is critical to academic achievement (Olivier et al., 2019). If teachers can use creativity to keep students interested in learning more about the language of learning and teaching, there is a better probability of students improving their speaking skills. According to Asif, Bashar, and Zafar (2018), learners and teachers in English language classrooms in Pakistan tend to retain their first language, and they have been observed speaking Urdu even in their English language classrooms most of the time. The same applies to South African schools in rural areas; learners and teachers speak their mother tongue during English lessons.

Anxiety about speaking in public

Anxiety is the fear a person feels when giving or preparing to give a speech in front of an audience. Stage fear or communication apprehension are two terms that have been used to describe it. According to Lenyai (2011), the "curriculum policy on additive bilingualism in South Africa is based on functional theories and recommends the use of the Total Physical Response (TPR) and communicative methods," which are currently regarded as the most suitable. According to Osmanaj (2020), children at a young age need to experience greater problems when it comes to public speaking, but this should continue as they get older. Osmanaj (2020) goes on to say that as students grow older, they become more nervous and hesitant to give public presentations because they are subjected to pressure and judgment from those around them. This means that learners need ample opportunities for oral expression, with teachers encouraging by establishing that the classroom is a judgment-free space dedicated to collective learning. As a result, as a guide to the learners, it is necessary to model the form of speaking in front of a crowd. Teachers should utilize these approaches to help children strengthen their expressive abilities while also teaching concepts that will help them interact with the subject matter offered in English in Grade 4 (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2011). It means that children must be exposed to a lot of spoken language in order to develop listening skills, and they must be given many opportunities to utilize the language to build speaking abilities (DBE, 2011).

The family's socio-economic situation

The learners' socioeconomic situation in rural locations appears to be a major factor in their low competency. Many educators in rural areas claim that because learners come from impoverished, illiterate households, they have no one at home to help them learn English, and they have minimal exposure to the language outside of the classroom (Mathebula, 2019). Learners from low-income families struggle in English lessons because their parents' low incomes limit their access to extra English classes, English reading materials, and an English-speaking environment. In this case, low-income parents are unable to pay for extra courses or tutoring to help their children improve their English skills. In this respect, they rely completely on teachers to educate their children. Furthermore, access to an English-speaking environment is impossible if the parents do not have the financial resources to do so (Hoff, 2020). Home is a place where children receive their primary education. In line with the preceding, the Progress in International Literacy Study (2011) asserts that the importance of a learner's home environment on their achievement cannot be overstated. According to Mohlala (2012), parents should have home libraries to help their children improve their reading and speaking skills. However, due to a variety of causes, there is a dearth of parental involvement in their children's education. Two such variables include illiteracy, particularly in impoverished and rural communities, and long and demanding work hours. Grandparents or others are frequently entrusted with the care of children.

Despite extensive documentation of these challenges, the literature reveals a notable absence of qualitative studies that integrate teacher and learner voices to examine how English-speaking difficulties are produced and sustained within everyday classroom practices. This study responds to this gap by offering a contextually grounded analysis that links structural constraints, pedagogical choices, and learner experiences within a unified theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Vygotsky's cognitive learning theory

For many years, Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development, particularly his Social Development Theory, has been well-established in educational research and practice. Learning should be dealt with within the zone of proximal development since children and their partners co-construct knowledge, so communities are highly important in molding the child through a process of "creating meaning" (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory is best suited to this study because it incorporates both cognitive and social development, which will ultimately influence how learners think and how their cognitive thinking and level of knowledge and skill influence their understanding and skill to apply knowledge appropriately at a level of scholastic acceptance and achievement (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, Vygotsky's Social Development Theory functions not only as a conceptual backdrop but as an analytical tool for interpreting classroom language practices. English-speaking development is

understood as a socially mediated process that depends on sustained interaction, guided participation, and progressive scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. Where teachers rely extensively on code-switching due to limited English proficiency or contextual pressures, opportunities for scaffolded English interaction are reduced, constraining learners' movement toward independent oral competence. This framework therefore enables a critical examination of how instructional practices either enable or inhibit language development.

2. Method

Research approach

This qualitative research is grounded in Vygotsky's cognitive learning theory which states that learners cannot function in isolation. According to Vygotsky (1978), teachers should lead, support, and motivate their students in the classroom. Teachers should use Vygotsky's theory of social development and instruction in the classroom to help students improve their second language speaking competence, which in this case is English FAL, in these two primary schools.

Research design

The study followed a case study format. One of the most essential qualities of a case study is its flexibility, which allows researchers to study a phenomenon in its natural setting and to collect data using a variety of methodologies (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013).

Research instruments

This study relied on non-traditional in-depth interviews with English teachers and focus groups for learners. The most relevant tools for obtaining thorough information regarding factors impacting learners' and teachers' accomplishment of English-speaking skills in South African disadvantaged primary schools were interviews with teachers in each of the selected schools. The researchers were able to acquire in-depth information regarding the topic by using interview questions (Maree, 2015).

Participants

Participants in this study were two teachers, one from each school, and 10 learners, five from each school. These participants were purposively selected from two different rural primary schools and were interviewed using the volunteer sampling technique, which refers to a scenario in which participants willingly volunteer to take part in a study (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2013).

Data analysis

The researcher used thematic analysis during data analysis. The interviews and focus groups were taped and then transcribed into English. The researcher made two copies of the transcript and encoded the data independently when the authors were confident that it was correct. The data were used to group comparable items after categorizing them. From there, the researcher built the encoding, which involved assigning codes to the data in order to distinguish them from one another. The data analysis in this paper was done manually in the following steps: organizing the data, finding and organizing ideas and concepts, creating overarching themes in the data, ensuring reliability and validity by giving the participants the transcribed document to check for accuracy, and ensuring reliability and validity by giving the participants the transcribed document to check for accuracy.

Ethical considerations

Permission was obtained from the University of Fort Hare through the Inter Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee (IFHREC) as a gatekeeper, then from the provincial head office of the Ministry of Education for access to schools, and then from the principals and teachers. Ethical clearance certificate to conduct this study was obtained from.

Trustworthiness

Maree (2015) validates this as a method for ensuring consistency and conducting credibility assessments with stakeholders. The researcher emphasized maintaining objectivity throughout the data collection process.

3. Findings

This study examined the factors influencing the development of English-speaking skills among learners and teachers in two primary schools located in the Buffalo City District. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participating schools and individuals. The schools are referred to as School A and School B, while the English teachers are identified as ET1A (School A) and ET2B (School B). Learners participated in focus groups labelled FGA (School A) and FGB (School B). The sample comprised two teachers and twelve learners from each school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and learner focus group discussions and analysed

using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and salient issues. The findings are organised into key themes that capture both teacher and learner perspectives and are substantiated with verbatim quotations to provide rich, contextualised insight into participants' experiences.

Theme 1: Factors affecting teachers' and learners' ability to communicate in English

Q1: How does the predominant use of the mother tongue affect learners' English-speaking skills?

ET1A (School A) explained:

"IsiXhosa is widely spoken both inside and outside the classroom, which slows down learners' acquisition of English-speaking skills. Because many learners struggle with English, I often use code-switching in my lessons to help them follow along. However, they become anxious when they are expected to speak English fluently."

ET2B (School B) added:

"Our school context is dominated by isiXhosa. As a result, learners face challenges in developing their English communication skills. We use isiXhosa in class to ensure that they understand the content, but this slows their progress in speaking English confidently."

Based on the teachers' responses about the influence of the mother tongue on learners' ability to communicate in English, both teachers from two schools agreed that isiXhosa is dominant in their school environments, which significantly hinders English oral proficiency. While code-switching is used to enhance understanding, it may contribute to learners' limited practice and increased anxiety when required to use English independently.

Q2: How does limited English vocabulary affect learners' oral performance?

ET1B (School B) observed:

"Learners generally perform poorly in oral tasks. They are not used to speaking with unfamiliar people and often don't know the correct words to use. Their performance improves only when they memorise presentations, which doesn't reflect genuine speaking ability.

ET2A (School A) agreed:

"Most Grade 4 learners cannot sustain meaningful conversations in English. Their improved performance usually results from rote memorisation, which does not necessarily help them develop real speaking skills.

Based on the teachers' responses to the question above, they all noted that learners' oral communication in English is weak, particularly due to teachers' limited vocabulary and lack of exposure to spoken English. Many rely on memorised phrases for formal presentations but are unable to engage in spontaneous conversation.

Q3: What challenges do teachers face in implementing English as the language of instruction?

ET1A (School A) commented:

"The main difficulty is that learners struggle to understand spoken English. This often forces us to code-switch or rely on the mother tongue to ensure that they follow the lesson.

ET2B (School B) elaborated:

"It's a challenge to encourage learners to speak English because they are not used to it. At school, at home, and in their communities, they primarily speak isiXhosa. It becomes even harder during group work, where they default to their home language. Unfortunately, there is limited oversight from HoDs, and teachers largely operate without classroom visits or support."

ET1A (School A) further added:

"Learners typically speak in their home language and try to write in what they believe is English. This often results in incorrect language use and misunderstandings."

Teachers expressed challenges in delivering lessons fully in English, mainly due to learners' limited comprehension. This often leads to the use of isiXhosa for explanation and reinforcement. Moreover, teachers cited the lack of instructional support and classroom monitoring from Heads of Department (HoDs) as an additional obstacle.

Learners' perspective

Q1: Is it possible that during classroom instruction, teachers at your school favor the learners' mother tongue over EFAL? If so, how is it depicted?

Focus Group A (FGA): School A

"Yes, sometimes our teachers use IsiXhosa to emphasize some of the concepts during English lessons when we don't understand. It helps us follow along, but it also means we don't get enough chance to speak English. When we are asked questions, we often answer in isiXhosa, and the teacher doesn't always correct us. We mostly speak English when we read or write, not when we talk."

Focus Group B (FGB): School B

"Most of the time, teachers explain things in isiXhosa so that we can understand faster. When the lesson starts, it's in English, but when we struggle, the teacher switches to isiXhosa. We don't do much speaking in English in class. We wish we had more speaking activities or games that help us learn new English words."

Q2: How do you feel about learning in English when your teacher mostly uses your mother tongue in class?

Focus Group A (FGA): School A

"It makes learning easier because we understand better when the teacher speaks isiXhosa. But at the same time, we feel scared when we must speak English, especially in front of the class. We don't get enough practice, so sometimes we forget English words. We want to learn English better, but we also don't want to feel lost when the teacher speaks fast."

Focus Group B (FGB): School B

"We feel safe when the teacher speaks in isiXhosa because we can follow the lesson. But sometimes we get bored during English lessons because we just listen—we don't speak much. We want more fun ways to speak English in class, like games, role play, or talking to each other in pairs."

4. Discussion

This study examined the factors that influence the development of English-speaking skills among Grade 4 learners and the challenges faced by teachers in implementing English First Additional Language (EFAL) instruction in two rural primary schools. The discussion is structured around the major themes that emerged from both teacher interviews and learner focus group discussions, supported by relevant literature.

How does the predominant use of the mother tongue affect learners' English-speaking skill

Findings revealed that isiXhosa is the dominant language in both schools, used extensively during instruction and daily interactions. Teachers reported frequent use of code-switching to aid comprehension, given that many learners struggle with English proficiency. Learners, in turn, expressed anxiety when asked to speak in English, preferring to respond in their mother tongue. This reliance on isiXhosa, while providing cognitive support, also reduces the learners' exposure to authentic English usage.

These observations align with Hussein et al. (2020), who note that teachers often code-switch for various pedagogical reasons, including clarifying instructions and managing classroom discourse. However, the overuse of the mother tongue can impede the development of English-speaking competence, as Fesi (2018) also argued. She emphasised that teachers who lack sufficient proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) often fail to create effective English-speaking opportunities for learners.

Furthermore, teachers in the study admitted that their own fluency in English is limited, which reinforces their dependency on isiXhosa. This linguistic gap further exacerbates the problem, as teachers are unable to model effective English communication. The finding that learners feel free to use isiXhosa during lessons supports Evans and Nthulana's (2018) conclusion that many rural teachers struggle to transfer academic knowledge effectively without resorting to the learners' home language.

How does limited English vocabulary affect learners' oral performance?

Both teachers and learners highlighted that vocabulary limitations greatly hinder learners' oral performance. Learners are unable to hold meaningful conversations in English, and their speaking ability tends to improve only during rehearsed presentations. Spontaneous use of English is rare, and learners often struggle with word selection and sentence structure. This is consistent with Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis, which

suggests that while a strong foundation in the first language is beneficial, second-language fluency requires sustained, intentional practice. The limited vocabulary observed among learners reflects a lack of interactive and oral-based strategies in the classroom. In agreement, learners expressed the need for more engaging learning activities, such as storytelling, role-playing, and speaking games, to help them acquire and use new English words more confidently. These findings are echoed in Brown (2001), who notes that reliance on memorisation fosters surface-level learning without developing communicative competence. Without regular opportunities to speak and interact in English, learners are unable to internalise the language, resulting in low oral performance and low confidence.

What challenges do teachers face in implementing English as the language of instruction?

Teachers reported numerous challenges in delivering EFAL instruction effectively. Chief among these was the learners' inability to understand spoken English, which often forces teachers to use the mother tongue. In addition, both schools lacked structured language support programmes or interventions to develop learners' English-speaking skills. A critical issue raised was the absence of monitoring and support from Heads of Department (HoDs) or Subject Education Specialists. Teachers noted that they operate without classroom visits or instructional guidance, leading to unregulated language practices and inconsistent use of English during teaching. This aligns with concerns raised by Fesi (2018), who argued that without strong leadership and accountability structures, language-in-education policies remain ineffective at the classroom level.

Teachers also indicated that some of their colleagues are not adequately qualified to teach EFAL, further compromising the quality of English instruction. The lack of capacity-building programmes, alongside low teacher proficiency in English, was identified as a barrier to improving both instruction and learner outcomes. Moreover, some participants pointed to socio-economic factors affecting language development. They noted that many parents are unable to support English learning at home, either due to low literacy levels or financial constraints that prevent them from buying books and resources. This finding is supported by Hoff (2020), who observed that access to an English-rich environment is often limited for learners from underprivileged households. Interestingly, despite these challenges, learners expressed a hopeful attitude. They believed that with more exposure to speaking activities and reduced reliance on isiXhosa, they could eventually become comfortable communicating in English, even with teachers who do not speak their home language. Learners also acknowledged that code-switching helps them understand unfamiliar vocabulary during lessons.

The findings extend existing research by demonstrating that English-speaking challenges in rural EFAL classrooms are not simply a consequence of learner deficits but are produced through constrained pedagogical conditions that limit sustained oral interaction in English. From a sociocultural perspective, the absence of consistent scaffolding restricts learners' access to the linguistic resources necessary for internalisation and autonomous language use. This insight shifts the analytical focus from individual learner performance to the instructional ecology of under-resourced classrooms, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of language inequality in primary education.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the field of language education by providing a theoretically grounded, empirically rich account of English-speaking challenges in under-resourced South African primary schools. By integrating teacher and learner perspectives within a sociocultural framework, the study advances understanding of how instructional practices, teacher capacity, and contextual constraints jointly shape oral language development. These insights have implications for EFAL pedagogy, teacher education, and language-in-education policy, particularly in contexts marked by persistent educational inequality.

Recommendation

Beyond classroom-level implications, the recommendations proposed in this study have relevance for teacher development policy and EFAL curriculum implementation in rural contexts. By linking pedagogical practices to sociocultural theories of language learning, the recommendations move beyond generic calls for improvement and instead propose targeted, theoretically informed interventions that address the structural conditions shaping English-speaking development. Based on the findings of this study and supported by relevant literature, the following recommendations are proposed to improve English-speaking skills development in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms within rural government schools:

Encourage consistent use of English as the medium of instruction

Teachers should be made aware of the importance of consistently using English during classroom lessons to enhance learners' fluency and comprehension. While code-switching may assist learners in understanding

content, its excessive use reduces opportunities for authentic English communication, limiting learners' oral language development (Hussein, Taha, & Alamri, 2020). Therefore, rural schools should develop and enforce policies aimed at minimizing unnecessary code-switching and supporting teachers in maintaining English as the primary language of instruction. This can be achieved through targeted professional development programmes that improve teachers' English proficiency and equip them with effective strategies for bilingual classrooms (Fesi, 2018).

Motivate learners to use English in oral interactions

Learners should be encouraged to reduce their reliance on their mother tongue during classroom discussions and oral presentations to strengthen their communicative competence in English. Teachers need to implement engaging and supportive oral language activities such as role plays, storytelling, and interactive games that promote confidence and active use of English in meaningful contexts (Brown, 2001; Cummins, 2000). These activities can help learners overcome anxiety associated with speaking English and foster vocabulary acquisition in an interactive way.

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Give equal emphasis to speaking skills in the curriculum

Speaking should be prioritized alongside listening, reading, and writing within EFAL teaching practices. The current overemphasis on memorization and passive learning limits learners' ability to engage in spontaneous English conversations (Brown, 2001). Integrating regular, communicative speaking opportunities will enhance learners' fluency and confidence, which are essential for effective language acquisition (Cummins, 2000).

Strengthening institutional support and classroom monitoring

Effective implementation of English language policies requires regular monitoring and support from school leadership, including Heads of Department (HoDs) and Subject Education Specialists. Classroom visits and feedback mechanisms will help ensure that teachers adhere to language-use guidelines and adopt best practices for multilingual teaching contexts (Fesi, 2018). Moreover, continuous professional development should be provided to improve teacher competency in EFAL instruction and classroom management strategies that limit mother tongue dominance.

Address socioeconomic constraints affecting language exposure

Given that many learners come from homes with limited access to English resources, additional support is necessary to supplement classroom learning. Schools should consider establishing after-school English clubs, reading initiatives, or partnerships with community organizations to provide learners with more opportunities for English language exposure beyond the classroom setting (Hoff, 2020).

Implementing these recommendations in an integrated manner has the potential to enhance English-speaking proficiency among Grade 4 learners in rural EFAL classrooms, thereby improving their overall academic success and communication skills.

Confirmation Statement

I confirm that this article is original and has not been previously published, in whole or in part, in any publication or platform.

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