

# Teachers' experiences of developing the comprehension skills of primary learners by employing home languages in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' experiences of implementing a multilingual support intervention in two township primary schools in Tshwane, Gauteng, involving Grade 5 and 6 learners ( $N = 162$ ), three teachers, a deputy principal, and a principal. Over six weeks, translated texts and audio recordings in Sepedi and isiZulu complemented English instruction during comprehension lessons. Data from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and observation sheets were thematically analysed. Findings showed increased learner engagement, participation, and comprehension in intervention classes compared to controls. Teachers valued multilingual resources as effective scaffolding tools but highlighted challenges such as limited training and resources. Grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory, the study concludes that translanguaging strategies enhance learning in multilingual classrooms when teachers are well supported, underscoring the need for curriculum transformation to integrate home languages without requiring full teacher fluency.

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## Introduction

Multilingualism has emerged as a prevalent phenomenon not only in South Africa but globally (Cenoz and Gorter 2017; Ferreira-Meyers and Horne 2017; Schissel et al. 2018). Socioeconomic and socio-political elements have exacerbated the problem (Edwards 2012; Otheguy, García and Reid 2015). Globalisation and migration have resulted in a rise in learners being instructed in a language distinct from their native languages (Daly and Sharma 2018), transforming the landscape of linguistic variety worldwide. The worldwide proliferation of linguistic diversity is evident in educational environments, and educators face challenges in offering adequate support for students (Garcia and Kleyn 2016; Goldstein 2003; Omidire 2019b). A shift from enforcing monolingual frameworks on multilingual learners (García and Wei 2014; Kleyn and García 2019) to addressing the varied linguistic requirements of all students in a classroom (Celic and Seltzer 2011) is being implemented worldwide.

Scholars in the field of education believe that learners' home language is an asset that, if adequately recognised in education, may enhance the process of learning and knowledge growth (Bamgbose 1991; Makalela 2015b; Ngcobo et al. 2016). According to researchers, linguistic dominance has disadvantaged South Africans, resulting in a failure to acknowledge home language as the

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preferred language of teaching (Bloch 1998; Childs 2016; Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa 2014; Mwindi and Van der Walt 2015; Webb 2009). Home language is essential for the development of academic knowledge, critical and creative thinking, numerous languages, and confident identities (Ayob and Omidire 2021; Natri and Räsänen 2015; Omidire 2019b). However, the importance attached to English as a language of teaching is reasonable, as it is regarded as the entrance to economic success and societal acceptance.

In this study, we explored the use of multiple languages as a learning support approach in a multilingual classroom, with the goal of aiding learning, teaching, and strengthening both home language and English language skills within the context of additive multilingualism. Our aim is to explore what translanguaging strategies work best in multilingual classrooms and how these practices can inform future teaching and teacher training. The study investigated the challenges and dynamics that educators face in multilingual educational contexts in South Africa. It highlights the dominance of English in the educational curriculum, which frequently ignores learners' first languages and fails to address the linguistic diversity of the student body.

The paper thus stresses the need for systemic adjustments in educational systems to facilitate multilingual education. It calls for a collaborative method including all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and school administrators, to develop an environment that values linguistic variety. This entails identifying the resources that students bring to the educational environment and using them as advantages rather than obstacles. The global success of translanguaging as an educational technique suggests that including home language can enhance learning experiences for multilingual pupils. Thus, this study calls for a fundamental shift in teachers' attitudes about language use in the classroom to foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

## Literature review

### *Overview of teacher positions in multilingual education settings in South Africa*

Catalano and Hamann (2016) emphasise that English overwhelmingly dominates the curriculum, despite the various languages that migrants bring with them because of the displacements and movements that characterise the world today. This is especially relevant since language variety highlights the root cause of home language marginalisation (Makalela 2018b) because of an overwhelming and dominant curriculum that forces learners to 'fit into a box' and does not allow for flexibility in language choice (Makalela 2015c).

According to Hillman, Graham, and Eslami (2019, p. 43), 'teachers often use the students' home language to build relationships, cultivate a shared identity, and create a positive classroom climate. Hillman, Graham, and Eslami (2019, p. 43), further assert that 'teacher-student relationships must be positive and supportive' for translanguaging methods to be successful. Adopting multilingual perspectives in the classroom and creating a multilingual climate in which all learners can engage yields positive results, proving translanguaging as a supporting method that should be maintained in multilingual classrooms (Omidire and Ayob 2020).

Kotzé, Van der Westhuizen, and Barnard (2017) states that supporting learners in multilingual classrooms can be difficult at times because teachers do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to support the varied use of languages to be offered in classrooms (Chataika et al. 2012; Engelbrecht 2006; Omidire and Ayob 2020). According to Nagy (2018), teachers face difficulties when required to utilise various languages in the classroom to improve learning since they have been trained according to monolingual language norms that prohibit the use of other languages in class. According to Omidire (2019b), teachers in multilingual classrooms do not have adequate training and time to deal with students who speak English as a second language, and they are unable to alter the curriculum to complement their teaching.

Ismaili (2015), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), and Mabiletja (2015) describe the additional obstacles that arise when the language of teaching is unfamiliar to the teacher or not the teacher's first

language. As a result, teachers must identify learners' assets, such as their first languages, as well as their sociocultural and developmental backgrounds, to create an open mind about various teaching techniques to improve learning (Ayob and Omidire 2021; Lwanga-Lumu 2020; Omidire 2019b). It is important to note that this is not unique to South Africa; teachers in school systems all over the world work with linguistically and socioculturally diverse groups of students (Blackledge and Creese 2010; Gardner & Martin-Jones 2012; Krause and Prinsloo 2016).

According to Gravett and Geyser (2004) and Phiri, Kagunda, and Mabhena (2013), a variety of teaching strategies are required in multilingual classrooms to ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to study and exhibit their knowledge. However, a recent study by Schissel et al. (2018) found that teachers in multilingual classrooms do not receive training on linguistic diversity or approaches for interacting with learners. These scholars indicate that the instructors in their study recognised the need to adjust their attitudes towards multilingualism and embrace an attitude that understands that the school team must work hard to accept multilingual education settings (Schissel et al. 2018).

García and Leiva (2014), together with Velasco and García (2014), agree that teachers should avoid teaching in English monolingually in multilingual classrooms and instead encourage students to practise dynamic language; this would create space for liberation and give students a voice, eventually eliminating negative outcomes for minority students. In South Africa, pupils from several linguistic groups are taught in the same classroom (Bloch 1998; Jones 2010; Plüddemann, Mati, and Mahlalela-Thusi 2000). Clauss-Ehlers (2006) discovered that, in addition to learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, teachers contribute their own experiences and histories to the classrooms they share with linguistically diverse students. Regarding this observation, Nel and Müller (2010) urge that teachers undergo training to prepare them to teach English as a second language, as well as general support to teach the learners effectively.

Furthermore, Wu (2018) adds that when choosing to use home language, teachers should consider their instructional environment and ensure that they are aware of the learners' levels of ability and attitudes towards using home language. Wu (2018) goes on to say that school policymakers and administrators should act by correctly adjusting policies, supporting teachers' professional development, and creating a pleasant and positive environment in which students and instructors can feel less frightened and more confident.

It appears that learning and teaching in multilingual contexts require a shift in focus within the academic domain to accommodate diversity. The influence of multilingualism is a global phenomenon that has revealed how educational systems are preparing for this drastic transformation, implying that this change is inevitable. It is critical that all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and principals, work together to make the move beneficial by promoting positivism, embracing language diversity, and accepting the reality of multilingualism to guide effective learning and teaching techniques.

The literature on South Africa's educational problem is well established, and it identifies numerous complicated elements that influence learning and teaching outcomes. Many researchers agree with the complicated characteristics inherent in South Africa, but they also believe that the potential of academic issues can be related to learners' ineffective utilisation of the resources they bring to school (Omidire 2021). These resources include learners' knowledge and competence in their own language, which has been disregarded and not used correctly in classroom settings. It is possible to examine home language as an advantage for learning and teaching while remaining aware of and empathetic to South Africa's academic issues.

As a result, our research leveraged South Africa's home language's assets to investigate learning and teaching in multilingual classrooms. The field of translanguaging, which uses home language as an asset in the educational domain, has achieved remarkable success around the world and is largely regarded as an effective way to compensate for the difficulties that multilingual learners face. In this research, we recognised various languages as a support technique for instructors to assist learners in gaining information in their different home languages, noting that a teacher must embrace home language as a strategy within the translanguaging approach.

### ***Mediated learning from an asset-based approach***

Mediated learning is a concept rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction and cultural tools in cognitive development. This approach posits that learning is not merely an individual endeavour but is significantly influenced by the social context in which it occurs. The asset-based approach to education focuses on leveraging the strengths and resources that students bring to the classroom, particularly in multilingual settings.

The sociocultural paradigm has been widely employed in educational research and has profoundly impacted language education. Carstens (2016, p. 3) asserts that 'a fundamental principle is that language serves as the primary medium of thought, originating from dialogue and social interaction, which subsequently promotes learning and development.' Vygotsky's theory emphasises an instructional method that, with adult guidance, systematically facilitates the learning process for learners (Carstens 2016).

The theory emphasises the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, positing that learning is inherently a social process (Vygotsky 1962). Central to Vygotsky's theory are several key concepts, including the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, and the importance of language as a cultural tool.

The concept of ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from a more knowledgeable individual, such as a teacher or peer. Vygotsky (1962) argued that effective learning occurs within this zone, where learners are challenged but supported enough to succeed. Scaffolding is another key term that describes the temporary support provided by teachers or peers capable of assisting learners to accomplish tasks they cannot complete alone. Scaffolding is crucial for helping students progress through their ZPD, encouraging them to gradually take on more responsibility for their learning. Finally, Vygotsky (1962) viewed language as one of the primary tools through which cultural knowledge is transmitted. He believed that language not only facilitates communication but also shapes thought processes and cognitive development. Thus, the use of language in educational settings is critical for effective learning.

Vygotsky's theory has significant implications for multilingual education, especially in contexts where students speak different home languages and are learning in a second language. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory offers valuable insights into how language functions as a tool for cognitive development within multilingual educational contexts. Drawing on this translanguaging can be understood as a form of linguistic scaffolding that supports learners as they move from what they can do independently to what they can achieve with guidance. In multilingual classrooms, learners' home languages serve as cognitive and affective bridges, enabling them to grasp complex concepts and progressively develop English proficiency. This aligns with García and Wei's (2014) view of translanguaging as a dynamic, meaning-making process that leverages the full linguistic repertoire of learners to mediate understanding, build confidence, and facilitate deeper learning. By leveraging students' home languages through translanguaging strategies, educators can create supportive environments that facilitate collaborative learning experiences that aligns with Vygotskian principles thus enabling schools continue to embrace multilingualism as an asset rather than a barrier.

### ***Research questions***

The main research questions addressed by this study include:

1. How do teachers perceive and experience the use of multilingual support strategies, specifically translanguaging, in primary school classrooms in South Africa?
2. What are the effects of employing home languages, such as Sepedi and isiZulu, on learners' comprehension, engagement, and participation during English literacy lessons?

3. What challenges do teachers face in implementing multilingual and translanguaging strategies, and what support or training do they need to effectively use these strategies?

## Methods

In this section, we briefly describe the context in which the participating teachers and learners work before presenting an analysis of the potentials and pressures, which characterise teachers' perceptions of translanguaging in a strategy to be implemented in multilingual classrooms.

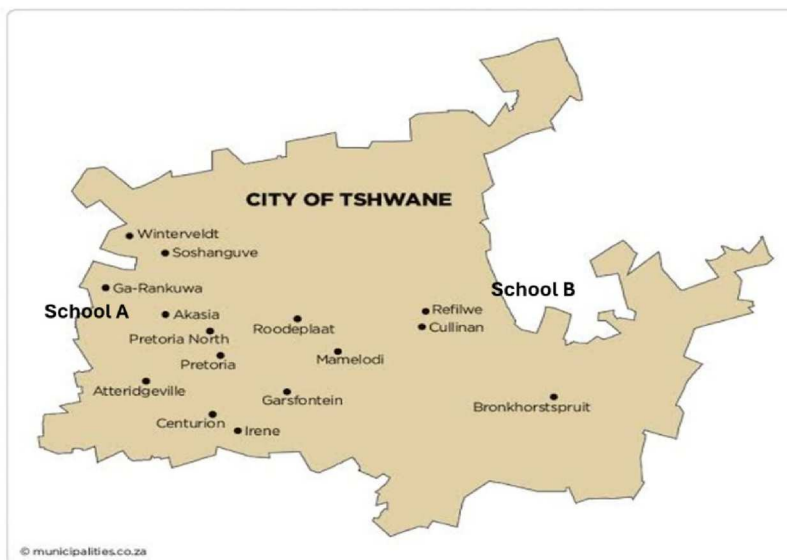
### Study context

The map in [Figure 1](#) highlights the location of the two schools that were selected for this study. Both schools are located within the City of Tshwane, Gauteng province, South Africa. School A is in the township area of Laudium, and School B is positioned in the township area of Mamelodi.

Both schools share commonalities such as learners living in township areas that lack basic resources, including electricity and water. Learners travel long distances by taxi to school. Poverty, unemployment, parental neglect, and lack of parental supervision are prevalent. Most learners' home language is either Zulu or Sepedi. However, due to immigration, some of the learners come from neighbouring African countries, and these learners and some of the teachers have a different home language. Most teachers receive no training on linguistic diversity or techniques for working with multilingual learners, a common reality globally.

### Research participants

The participants in this study consisted of three teachers, one deputy principal, and one school principal (three females and two males). The three female participants were trained primary school English teachers, with one serving as a deputy principal who also taught English and History. English was the home language of two teachers and the school principal, while Sepedi was the home



**Figure 1.** Location of school A and school B.

language of the deputy principal. The male participant was a primary school English teacher whose home language was Shona.

The selection of schools and teachers was guided by purposive sampling to ensure representation of the multilingual teaching contexts typical of South African primary education. Two public primary schools were selected based on their linguistic diversity, as learners in these schools spoke a range of home languages including Sepedi, Setswana, isiZulu, and English. The schools were also located in socio-economically distinct communities within the same district, which enabled a richer and more comparative understanding of classroom dynamics. Teachers were chosen based on their experience teaching in multilingual classrooms and their willingness to participate in the translanguaging support intervention. Each participating teacher had at least three years of classroom experience and demonstrated an understanding of learners' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. School management teams were consulted to secure institutional support and ensure alignment with curriculum expectations. This selection process made it possible to capture authentic classroom realities and the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders who navigate multilingual learning environments daily, offering deep insights into how translanguaging practices can enhance learner participation and comprehension (Table 1).

### Data collection

The multilingual teaching strategy included the intentional use of three languages during English lessons in Grade 5 and 6 classrooms in two township schools. The process involved gaining access to comprehension texts from the learners' prescribed English language textbook for Grades 5 and 6. The passages from the books were translated into both Sepedi and isiZulu. They were also reverse translated to ensure accuracy. Secondly, the translated texts were read by translators fluent in the languages, and the audio recorded, prior to contact with the learners in class.

The teachers involved were interviewed prior to the implementation of the intervention, and afterwards. The implementation took place over a period of six weeks. Researchers provided the printed text in English, and the translated texts in isiZulu and Sepedi and in the audio versions. During the lessons, the printed comprehension passages for the lessons were handed out to the learners. The teachers' role comprised: (a) following their usual lesson plan structure at the beginning;

**Table 1.** Summary of the school sites.

Data collection sites				Data collection sites			
Research site A: school				Research site B: school B			
School A				School B			
School is situated in a township area. Learners commute by taxi from their respective township areas.				School is situated in a township area. Learners commute by taxi from their respective township areas.			
Two grades				Two grades			
Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 5		Grade 6	
Four classes each				Four classes each			
Grade 5C	Grade 5I	Grade 6C	Grade 6I	Grade 5C	Grade 5I	Grade 6C	Grade 6I
No. of learners	No. of learners	No. of learners	No. of learners	No. of learners	No. of learners	No. of learners	No. of learners
40	39	42	39	43	40	43	40
Home languages spoken by majority of the learners				Home languages spoken by majority of the learners			
English, Sepedi, Zulu		English, Sepedi, Zulu, Xhosa		English, Sepedi		English, Sepedi, Zulu, Urdu	
Additional home languages spoken by a few learners				Additional home languages spoken by a few learners			
Zulu, Venda, Xitsonga		Zulu, Venda, Urdu		Shona, Ndebele		Xhosa	
School Principal				School Head of Department (HOD)			
School Principal's Home language				HOD's Home Language			
English				Zulu			
Teacher 1's home language		Teacher 2's Home Language		Teacher 3's Home Language			
English		English		Shona			

and (b) incorporating the translated materials for the support of the learners. The teachers either read or asked the learners to read the text in English, and this was followed by a translated audio recording of the text being played in both Sepedi and IsiZulu while the learners were asked to follow the audio reading in the translated text handouts they were given. The teacher proceeded to conduct the lesson in English, prompting the learners to respond to questions related to the comprehension text they had just listened to from the prescribed book. The students were instructed to record their answers on the provided worksheets. These worksheets were subsequently collected and reviewed by both the teachers and researchers during the data analysis phase. This process allowed for the collection of teachers' perspectives, yielding valuable insights and suggestions regarding effective practices and necessary revisions in the implementation of translanguaging within South African educational contexts.

Another important element of the translanguaging support intervention provided was the reverse translation exercise, aimed at enhancing learners' understanding and bilingual articulation. In this exercise, learners initially interacted with a brief English text or passage presented by the teacher. Upon confirming foundational comprehension, the teacher encouraged learners to collectively translate the main concepts of the passage into their native languages (such as Sepedi and isiZulu) through facilitated dialogue. After learners had expressed meaning in their native languages, they were prompted to reverse translate, which involved rephrasing the same concepts in English using their own terminology. This technique enabled learners to transition seamlessly between languages, enhancing both material comprehension and English ability. The teacher served as a facilitator, constructing meaning, clarifying terminology, and emphasising equivalences or conceptual distinctions among languages. The practice enhanced metalinguistic awareness and affirmed learners' linguistic repertoires as valid resources for learning.

### **Data analysis**

The eight interview transcripts from teachers, collected both before and after the implementation of the support strategy, alongside observation sheets from all participating teachers after each session, and classroom observation notes, were analysed thematically. The analysis aimed to identify and critically examine emerging patterns and potential themes within the data. These themes were subsequently coded and aligned with the research questions to provide a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences in multilingual classrooms, their perceptions of using multiple languages, and their views on the prospects of translanguaging as a support strategy for learning in such contexts.

Thematic analysis was conducted using Nvivo an automated qualitative data analysis software. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase framework for thematic analysis to ensure a systematic and rigorous process. First, the researcher became familiar with the data through repeated reading of the transcribed interviews and observation notes. Second, initial codes were generated to capture significant features of the data relevant to the research questions. Third, these codes were grouped to identify potential themes, allowing the researcher to construct patterns and categories across the data. Fourth, the emerging themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset. Fifth, each theme was clearly defined and named, with supporting data extracts analysed to explain their significance. Finally, the themes were synthesised and reported, forming the foundation for the study's findings.

A coding framework was established during the analysis to ensure consistency and coherence throughout the coding process. While the study did not employ statistical inference, the frequency of codes was noted to indicate the prevalence of particular ideas, without overstating generalisability. To enhance credibility and reliability, triangulation was achieved through peer debriefing and consultation with an experienced qualitative researcher who reviewed the coding and thematic development process. Additionally, a reflective journal was maintained to document analytical decisions and promote reflexivity throughout the study.

## Findings

This study investigated teachers' experiences with a multilingual support intervention designed for linguistically diverse primary classrooms. The intervention involved utilising translated recordings and texts of comprehension passages to enhance lesson delivery in multilingual settings. These classrooms often face educational challenges due to the cultural and linguistic diversity present (Prinsloo et al. 2018). Furthermore, the shift towards English as the primary language of instruction from Grade 4 onward does not sufficiently equip learners for effective learning (Stoop 2017). Language is crucial in education, not only for English as a subject but also for mastering other subjects across the curriculum. The following are some of the themes.

### *Perception and experiences of teachers in the use of multilingual support strategies*

Teachers across both schools consistently expressed positive perceptions towards the incorporation of multilingual support strategies, particularly translanguaging, during English literacy lessons. They highlighted that translanguaging created an enabling learning environment, encouraging learners to participate more confidently and with greater enthusiasm. One of the strongest themes to emerge was that learners enjoyed the process of hearing and reading texts in their home languages alongside English. Teachers observed that this experience heightened engagement and stimulated peer learning. Teacher 1 from School A noted *'They enjoyed it more; you could see them looking through the text and finding the English words and the Zulu words. They were trying to code switch themselves.'* The teachers further reported that learners demonstrated more curiosity and initiative when texts were made available in multiple languages. Teacher 2 affirmed this observation by saying *'Good. The learners were able to answer the questions and seemed to have a better understanding of the text.'*

Teachers also reflected that translanguaging created a non-threatening classroom climate where learners were more comfortable responding to questions. Learners appeared more eager to contribute to class discussions and were visibly less anxious about misunderstanding English-only content. According to Teacher 3 at School B, *'They liked it. Most of them emphasised that they should never forget their home language. They managed to answer all the questions they were given.'* The HOD from School B also confirmed this, noting the learners' ability to follow the lesson more closely when home languages were used: *'But I saw learners understand because when that person was speaking in Zulu, they were having their story in front of them, neh? They were able to turn around the pages. Same time all of them turned the page; it means they were following.'*

Observational notes also indicated that learners displayed high levels of excitement and attentiveness during translanguaging-supported lessons. One entry read: *'Learners showed enthusiasm and paid attention throughout; the objectives were met.'* A comparative difference emerged between the control and intervention classrooms. Teachers observed that the intervention classes showed increased interest and participation when home languages were integrated. Teacher 1 explained *'the control class did not look very excited, but the intervention class showed more interest once the lesson was done in Sepedi and Zulu.'* Similarly, Teacher 2 from School A remarked *'the intervention class was more involved and more learners answered questions, where in the controlled class, fewer answered questions.'* Therefore, it can be inferred that teachers perceived translanguaging not only as an effective instructional strategy but also as a tool for motivating learners, cultivating confidence, and creating a supportive classroom environment.

### *Effects of employing home languages on learners' comprehension, engagement, and participation during English literacy lessons*

Data analysis revealed that students in classes explicitly implementing the multilingual support intervention demonstrated markedly better engagement and understanding compared to control

classes that continued with traditional monolingual instructional approaches. The incorporation of home languages had a marked effect on learners' comprehension, as evidenced by both teacher reports and observation sheets. Teachers consistently noted that learners were able to grasp the content of comprehension passages more effectively when these were supplemented with translations and audio recordings in Sepedi and isiZulu.

Teacher 3 described the contrast clearly by saying '*Big difference. Home language facilitated better understanding. The learners enjoyed listening to the audio in their home language.*' Similarly, Teacher 1 highlighted the impact on vocabulary development saying '*It would be very useful because, like, their vocabulary is very limited at school, and when they go home, they are speaking their home language. So, I think they do need their home language to guide them.*'

The HOD's reflections provided a vivid evidence of learners' improved comprehension: '*You could see they knew he was talking about this line ... That is why they were able to turn the page because they were understanding. I was impressed.*' Another observation sheet comment confirmed this finding: '*Multilingualism definitely increases understanding. Most failures are due to language barriers. That's why those who learn in their home language, e.g. the English, Germans and Chinese, do better than Africans who have to learn in foreign languages.*'

Beyond comprehension, the integration of home languages significantly improved learners' engagement and willingness to participate. Teachers observed more learners volunteering to answer questions, and a generally livelier classroom atmosphere. Teacher 2 noted: '*The learners in the intervention class understood better, and more learners raised their hands to answer.*' Also, classroom observation notes echoed these accounts: '*They loved it. They were very attentive. They enjoyed it. All the learners showed a lot of interest using their mother language in English.*' '*They did enjoy the languages and, umm, you could see they were enjoying the lesson itself, and they were more motivated to answer because they knew what they were going to say.*'

The strategy also encouraged learners to make active connections between English and their home languages, thus fostering code-switching and deeper language awareness. Teacher 1 remarked: '*They were looking through the text and finding the English words and the Zulu words; they were trying to code switch themselves.*' Additionally, learners expressed pride in using their home languages, stating that they should '*never forget their home language.*' This suggests that the intervention reinforced both cognitive and identity dimensions of learning.

Therefore, use of Sepedi and isiZulu supported not only comprehension but also enhanced classroom participation and fostered a stronger connection between learners' home and school languages.

### **Use of multilingual resources and cultural relevance**

Teachers expressed considerable satisfaction with utilising multilingual resources, such as translated audio recordings and texts. The data revealed that teachers employed a variety of translanguaging strategies aimed at supporting learner engagement and comprehension in multilingual classrooms. For instance, teachers frequently used translated audio recordings in learners' home languages such as Sepedi and isiZulu to introduce comprehension passages. As Teacher 1 explained, '*We played recordings in the students' home languages so they could understand the story better before trying it in English.*' Similarly, Teacher 3 described encouraging students to switch between languages during classroom discussions, asking questions in English but encouraging responses in their home languages: '*Students started code-switching naturally; they would sometimes translate difficult words or phrases themselves, which helped them understand the material.*' These resources served as effective teaching aids that facilitated understanding and made lessons more inclusive.

Teachers appreciated the potential for curriculum materials to be more linguistically inclusive. For instance, Teacher 1 proposed that textbooks include CDs with audio in multiple languages, such as Sepedi and Zulu, to cater to the diverse linguistics of learners. The principal from School A echoed the need for such resources, stating, '*If your learners at the bottom are equipped with a strong foundation ... then obviously when they go up to Grade 12 ... you won't have such a high*

rate of failures.’ These remarks emphasise the importance of culturally and linguistically relevant materials that support learners’ linguistic assets and promote better academic outcomes.

### **Challenges and limitations highlighted by teachers**

While teachers perceived the use of home languages positively, they also identified several challenges in implementing such strategies effectively. The most frequently mentioned constraints were limited resources, time pressures, and inadequate professional training.

#### **Resource limitations**

Teachers highlighted the lack of readily available multilingual teaching materials, such as translated texts, audio recordings, and supplementary resources in learners’ home languages which often proved inadequate for the number of learners in their classrooms. As a result, they were forced to improvise or produce their own translations, raising concerns about accuracy and consistency. The limited availability of materials not only restricted the use of translanguaging but also undermined the sustainability of the practice.

Teacher 1, noted that multilingual resources are not included as part of standard textbooks: *‘So I think it would be very nice if the CD can have the Sepedi or the Zulu and other languages in there, so when they are doing the listening and speaking assessment, it plays in all the languages. That would work better.’* Teacher 2 said, *‘Yes, the textbook comes with resources only in English. I think each textbook and learning area should have resources in other languages too, not only for English, but also for Maths, Afrikaans, and everything.’* Teachers also noted that overcrowded classrooms made it difficult to manage multilingual teaching effectively. This was confirmed by the comment of School Principal from School A that *‘Although after listening to you about what you are saying that you are going to pre-record and all the things like that, is an excellent idea and I hope it works. It’s just that if you are looking at 42 children in a classroom ...’*

#### **Time constraints**

Teachers expressed concern that integrating multiple languages into lessons required additional time for preparation and delivery. The School Principal explained: *‘Then obviously, it’s going to make an impact in classroom, and the impact will be such that your results will improve and the learners will benefit ... but it takes more time.’*

#### **Lack of training and professional development**

A recurring theme was the lack of training to equip teachers with skills in multilingual pedagogy. Teachers expressed a strong need for professional development opportunities tailored to equip them with practical methods for integrating learners’ languages into lessons. As teacher 2 explained, *‘We need more training on how to use our learners’ languages effectively in lessons,’* pointing to gaps in pedagogical preparedness. Teacher 1 acknowledged the limitations of their current expertise: *‘Very difficult. So, if the teacher is able to parallel teach, and knows the language, obviously you need re-skilling and up-skilling of teachers.’* The School Principal also reinforced this point, highlighting systemic issues around teacher development: *‘Teachers need training to manage support strategies in line with the translanguaging approach, but there is no platform and no funding for continuous development.’*

Concerns about teachers’ own linguistic abilities further complicated implementation. Some admitted that their limited proficiency in learners’ home languages reduced their confidence and effectiveness in applying translanguaging strategies. These challenges were compounded by logistical factors, such as time pressures and heavy curriculum demands, which left little room for experimenting with multilingual practices.

Learners, too, were affected by these constraints. Students whose home languages were not spoken by teachers, or were absent from the available resources, often struggled to participate fully. As

Vandeyar and Catalano (2020) note, when learners' languages are excluded or unsupported, they may feel marginalised unless adequate scaffolding is in place. Teachers in this study echoed this concern, reporting difficulty engaging learners who spoke languages outside their proficiency. They suggested that additional support such as visual aids, peer mediators, community partnerships, and a wider range of multilingual materials would help ensure equitable inclusion. Without such supports, the benefits of translanguaging risk remaining unevenly distributed across learners.

## Discussion

This study provides insightful perspectives into teachers' experiences and perceptions of implementing translanguaging strategies in multilingual classrooms within the South African context. The findings demonstrate that teachers generally perceive the integration of home languages as a valuable pedagogical tool that enhances learner engagement, comprehension, and overall classroom dynamics. These perceptions align with existing literature that recognises the importance of leveraging linguistic diversity to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

### *Teacher perceptions on using home languages as a support strategy*

The positive stance of teachers towards incorporating learners' home languages underscores its significance in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Teachers reported that when learners' home languages were used in lessons, students displayed increased enthusiasm, attentiveness, and confidence. For instance, teachers observed that students showed greater motivation and were more eager to participate actively during lessons that integrated their home languages. These observations are consistent with Hillman, Graham, and Eslami (2019), who emphasize that the use of home languages fosters positive classroom climates, builds relationships, and encourages a shared sense of identity among learners. Embracing home languages aligns with the principles of additive multilingualism, which advocate for valuing and developing learners' full linguistic repertoires rather than suppressing their native languages for academic conformity.

Furthermore, teachers acknowledged that home language functions as a vital resource for understanding texts and vocabulary. By highlighting that students could better decode and interpret texts when their home languages were involved, teachers recognised that home language acts as a bridge to learning. This supports the evidence from Garcia and Leiva (2014), Velasco and Garcia (2014), who argue that translanguaging spaces where multiple languages are used flexibly enhance cognitive engagement and understanding. Teachers' recognition of home language as an asset rather than an obstacle reflects a progressive shift in attitudes, moving away from the traditional deficit view that perceives learners' home languages as barriers to learning.

Teachers' perceptions in this study reflect a significant shift from the deficit views often associated with multilingual learners in South African classrooms. Historically, learners' home languages have been sidelined in favour of English, perceived as the sole gateway to academic success and socioeconomic mobility (Bloch 1998; Makalela 2018b). By contrast, the participating teachers recognised that encouraging learners to use their home languages in parallel with English contributed to better comprehension, vocabulary development, and confidence.

This shift towards valuing linguistic diversity resonates with the asset-based approach (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993), which emphasises recognising learners' linguistic resources as strengths rather than barriers. Teachers' comments that 'learners should never forget their home language' reflect this re-framing of home languages as integral assets to both identity and academic achievement. The use of translanguaging also appeared to foster stronger teacher–student relationships, creating a positive classroom climate. Hillman, Graham, and Eslami (2019) highlight that such relationships are central to translanguaging success, as they cultivate trust and shared identity. By acknowledging learners' linguistic repertoires, teachers positioned themselves as mediators of

knowledge rather than enforcers of monolingual norms, thereby operationalising the sociocultural principle of learning through social interaction (Vygotsky 1962).

### ***Implementation of translanguaging strategies and classroom experiences***

The study reveals that teachers actively employed translanguaging strategies, such as using translated texts and audio recordings, to facilitate comprehension. Teachers observed that these strategies resulted in increased learner participation and engagement. For example, learners were more attentive and willing to express themselves in classroom interactions when they could access content through their home languages. Such findings are corroborated by the global literature on translanguaging, which posits that flexible language use supports not only comprehension but also promotes learner agency and confidence.

Importantly, teachers noted that learners' understanding of texts improved significantly, evidenced by their ability to answer questions accurately and follow stories in both home language and English. This observation aligns with the work of Bialystok (2018) and Omidire (2021), who assert that translanguaging facilitates deeper engagement with texts, enabling learners to connect new knowledge to their existing linguistic resources. Moreover, the use of translated audio materials was seen as a mediating approach that scaffolds learners' comprehension, echoing the findings that mediational tools, such as audio recordings and bilingual texts, support cognitive development in multilingual settings.

Despite these positive experiences, teachers articulated the challenges encountered during implementation. A recurring concern was the lack of adequate training to effectively employ multilingual instructional strategies. Although teachers supported the use of home languages, many expressed a need for professional development to build confidence and competencies in translanguaging pedagogies. This is consistent with the literature that emphasises the importance of teacher training in multilingual education. Guerrero Nieto highlights that mediating and scaffolding in multilingual classrooms require specific skills, which can be developed through targeted professional development programmes.

Resource limitations also emerged as a critical barrier. Teachers expressed the need for more translanguaging resources, such as bilingual texts, audio support materials, and curriculum adaptations that accommodate multiple languages. These limitations reflect systemic issues within South African education, particularly in under-resourced township schools where access to multilingual materials remains scarce. The lack of comprehensive multilingual resources not only hampers the effective deployment of translanguaging strategies but also signals a need for systemic curriculum reforms that recognise linguistic diversity as an asset.

### ***Perceived effectiveness of translanguaging in enhancing learning***

Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of translanguaging strategies align with empirical evidence suggesting that language practices that respect and utilise learners' linguistic backgrounds can significantly improve comprehension and learner outcomes. Teachers observed that when learners could access content in their home languages, their understanding of complex concepts and vocabulary improved, which contributed to higher engagement levels and potentially better academic performance.

The integration of Sepedi and isiZulu alongside English was found to substantially enhance learners' comprehension of English texts. Teachers consistently reported that learners were better able to follow, understand, and respond to comprehension passages when audio translations and parallel texts in their home languages were provided. Learners' ability to 'turn the page at the same time' as the Zulu audio was played, as one HOD described, provides vivid evidence of real-time comprehension facilitated by translanguaging.

This finding echoes research demonstrating that literacy skills in one language can transfer to another, supporting academic development across languages (Cummins 2000; Makalela 2015a). By encouraging learners to anchor new concepts in familiar linguistic structures, translanguaging helped bridge the gap between home and school languages, mitigating the risk of learners being left behind in English-only classrooms (Stoop 2017).

Beyond comprehension, translanguaging improved learner engagement and participation. Teachers observed more learners raising their hands, answering questions, and displaying enthusiasm during lessons. Learners also engaged in self-initiated code-switching, comparing English and Zulu words in texts, which demonstrates metalinguistic awareness and active learning. Such practices support Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners achieve higher levels of understanding through guided scaffolding. The translated texts and audio recordings functioned as mediational tools, enabling learners to access English literacy tasks that might otherwise have been beyond their independent capabilities.

Furthermore, translanguaging reinforced learners' cultural and linguistic identities. Teachers reported that learners expressed pride in their home languages, insisting they should not be forgotten. This aligns with findings from Childs (2016) and Omidire and Ayob (2020), who show that translanguaging not only aids comprehension but also validates learners' identities, contributing to socio-emotional well-being. By affirming learners' linguistic repertoires, the intervention contributed to holistic educational outcomes, bridging cognitive, social, and affective domains of learning.

This finding supports the broader literature advocating for multilingual pedagogies as an effective approach to overcoming language barriers. For example, García and Leiva (2014) argue that embracing the entire linguistic repertoire of learners fosters a more inclusive classroom environment that values diversity and promotes academic success. The teachers' acknowledgment of increased learner participation mirrors this stance, illustrating that translanguaging strategies foster an environment where learners feel respected and empowered. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of not necessitating teachers to be fluent in all learners' home languages to employ translanguaging effectively. Instead, what is essential is the provision of opportunities for learners to utilize their home languages during learning activities, revealing an understanding that linguistic support can be mediated through resources and structured scaffolding rather than language proficiency alone. This approach democratises multilingual education, making it more accessible and feasible within contexts of limited teacher language repertoires.

### **Challenges and systemic barriers**

Despite the positive perceptions, the study highlighted notable challenges that hinder the widespread adoption of translanguaging. Teachers reported that insufficient training, resource constraints, and systemic curricula that favour English as the sole medium of instruction present significant barriers. These obstacles reflect broader systemic issues within South African education, where the dominance of English often marginalises other indigenous languages and limits the practical implementation of multilingual strategies. The challenge of resource scarcity, including the absence of multilingual textbooks, audio materials, and assessment tools, curtails the potential for translanguaging to be embedded systematically. While the intervention provided translated resources, teachers emphasised that such materials need to be systematically integrated into curriculum design. This challenge reflects wider findings in South African research, where the dominance of English in curricular materials marginalises other languages (Catalano and Hamann 2016; Mwindi and Van der Walt 2015).

Furthermore, the lack of policy directives or curriculum frameworks that explicitly support multilingual pedagogies risks relegating translanguaging to an optional or peripheral practice rather than an integral component of inclusive education. Teachers expressed concerns that translanguaging strategies required additional time, both for preparation and delivery. With overcrowded

classrooms and rigid curriculum demands, teachers often feel pressured to ‘cover’ content at the expense of deep comprehension. This tension reflects Prinsloo et al.’s (2018) critique of South Africa’s performance-driven education policies, which prioritise assessment outcomes over meaningful learning.

Perhaps the most pressing barrier identified was the lack of teacher training in multilingual pedagogy. Teachers acknowledged that while they recognised the value of translanguaging, they lacked the skills to implement it systematically. This concern echoes earlier studies (Kotzé, Van der Westhuizen, and Barnard 2017; Schissel et al. 2018), which show that South African teachers are often trained within monolingual frameworks, leaving them ill-prepared for the linguistic realities of their classrooms. Without targeted professional development, the sustainability of translanguaging strategies remains uncertain.

### ***Limitations of the research***

Only two schools from one province participated in the study. Inclusion of more schools with various demographics could have yielded additional useful information. A limited number of teachers participated in this study; more views from teachers would provide greater value in terms of supporting them in multilingual classrooms. Being a qualitative study, it is difficult to rule out researcher bias and influence, despite paying close attention to ensuring quality assurance and criteria. Future research should expand the sample to include schools across diverse contexts, including rural and urban settings, to capture broader patterns. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the sustained impact of translanguaging on literacy development, academic performance, and learner identity over time. Comparative studies with other multilingual African countries could also provide cross-cultural insights into effective strategies for managing linguistic diversity in education.

### ***Implications for practice and research***

Although managing multiple languages in multilingual classrooms may initially appear challenging for teachers, the findings of this study reveal that teachers view the use of home languages as an effective strategy for enhancing learning, engagement, and understanding. Teachers recognized that drawing on learners’ linguistic repertoires helps bridge language barriers and fosters confidence in multilingual contexts. There is therefore a clear need to promote pedagogical approaches that treat home languages not as obstacles, but as valuable resources for learning and teaching. In classrooms where multiple languages coexist, teachers can apply parallel language support using both the language of instruction and learners’ home languages to scaffold understanding and develop proficiency in both.

Importantly, encouraging the use of multiple languages for learning does not require teachers to be fluent in all learners’ languages. What matters most is creating an environment that allows learners to access and express knowledge through the languages they know best. This inclusive approach enhances learner participation and comprehension, and supports cognitive and linguistic development. The study’s findings provide a nuanced understanding of teachers’ experiences with translanguaging strategies, equipping educators with practical insights into how to navigate multilingual classrooms effectively.

Globally, translanguaging has emerged as a transformative pedagogy that enables communities to thrive in linguistically diverse settings. This has implications for the South African Department of Education, particularly regarding curriculum transformation and policy reform to ensure that multilingual learners are adequately supported. Through scaffolding and mediated learning such as the use of translated audio recordings teachers created rich learning moments that promoted listening, critical thinking, and communication. Ultimately, recognising home languages as assets within the teacher learner partnership enhances communication, strengthens English competence, and deepens overall academic understanding.

## Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that teachers perceive translanguaging and the integration of home languages as powerful strategies for enhancing learner engagement, comprehension, and confidence in multilingual classrooms. The findings affirm that using learners' home languages as scaffolding tools helps bridge the gap to English proficiency and supports deeper understanding reflecting Vygotsky's principles of the Zone of Proximal Development and guided scaffolding. Beyond linguistic gains, translanguaging also validates learners' cultural identities, contributing to more inclusive and responsive learning environments. However, persistent challenges such as limited teacher training, large class sizes, and inadequate institutional support continue to hinder consistent implementation. The findings underscore the need for systemic interventions in teacher education, policy, and classroom practice to embed multilingual pedagogies as part of everyday teaching.

Accordingly, this study recommends that teacher professional development extend beyond awareness-building to include practice-oriented modules such as Translanguaging Pedagogies in Practice, Reverse Translation for Literacy Development, and Scaffolding through Home Languages. These modules would provide teachers with hands-on strategies to integrate home languages meaningfully in instruction. Also, incorporating digital tools like Canvas, Padlet, Flip, and Book Creator can further enhance translanguaging activities, enabling teachers and learners to collaborate, translate, and express understanding across languages through multimodal means.

Additionally, government should establish professional learning communities to promote reflection, peer learning, and co-creation of multilingual materials. Future research should explore the long-term impact of translanguaging on learners' academic performance as well as how technology can extend these benefits. Ultimately, translanguaging should be recognized not merely as a teaching method but as a social justice imperative central to fostering equitable, culturally grounded, and linguistically responsive education in South Africa's multilingual classrooms.

## Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Informed consent of the participants was obtained before embarking on the study. The study was conducted confidentially, and care was taken to protect the identity of the participants.

## Data availability statement

The dataset of the present study is available upon request from the author.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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