



Early Literacy through Translanguaging: Insights from Multilingual Classrooms in Soshanguve Township, South Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the role of translanguaging in promoting early literacy within multilingual classrooms in South Africa, with a focus on Soshanguve township. In contexts where multiple languages intersect, young learners often rely on flexible linguistic practices to navigate literacy learning. The study draws from classroom observations and interviews with ten participants who were drawn from teachers and parents, highlighting how translanguaging is used as a pedagogical tool to enhance comprehension, scaffold learning, and affirm learners' linguistic identities. A qualitative approach was used with a case study as the design. An interpretive paradigm was used to look at the day-to-day practices of translanguaging of educators. Data was analysed through thematic analysis. Findings suggest that translanguaging supports early literacy development by bridging home and school languages, fostering participation, and strengthening conceptual understanding. By allowing the use of multiple languages, learners can grasp complex concepts more effectively. The flexibility of translanguaging assists with scaffold learning, making abstract ideas more accessible. Translanguaging practices affirmed learners' linguistic identities, contributing to a positive classroom environment where diversity was valued. This affirmation encouraged students to take pride in their multilingualism. The study recommended that educators and curriculum developers should incorporate translanguaging strategies into early literacy curricula, recognising the linguistic diversity of learners and aligning pedagogical practices with their linguistic realities.

Keywords

communication, language, learning, teaching, translanguaging

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Language plays a critical role in children's literacy development, particularly in the early years. Research has long established that learners' home languages are central to identity formation and serve as the foundation for later learning (Trudell, 2016). However, many South African children, especially in township schools, experience a mismatch between the languages they speak at home and the English medium commonly used in classrooms (Boikhutso & Jotia, 2013; Sharma, 2013). This disconnect often results in barriers to learning, as children are unable to fully express their knowledge and engage with literacy practices. Recent scholarship highlights those multilingual pedagogies, such as translanguaging, can provide meaningful bridges between learners' linguistic backgrounds and academic content, fostering both inclusivity and improved educational outcomes. While earlier debates on language in education have focused primarily on home language instruction versus English medium instruction, more recent scholarship highlights the value of translanguaging—the dynamic use of multiple languages in meaning-making and literacy learning (García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging allows learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, rather than being confined to a single language, thereby creating more inclusive and effective learning environments.

In multilingual contexts such as Soshanguve Township, translanguaging has the potential to bridge home and school languages, enabling learners to access literacy in ways that are meaningful, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate. This article, therefore, explores the role of translanguaging in supporting early literacy in

multilingual early childhood classrooms in Soshanguve, South Africa. Empirical studies from South Africa and beyond underscore that when translanguaging is systematically incorporated, through pragmatic strategies such as brief, targeted use of learners' home languages scaffolded by purposeful re-anchoring to the language of instruction, students exhibit significant gains in literacy skills and comprehension across diverse learner profiles (Sefotho, 2022; Suryani et al., 2025).

Globally, scholars are increasingly advocating for pedagogies that recognise learners' full linguistic repertoires. Translanguaging, understood as the strategic use of multiple languages within teaching and learning, has emerged as a promising approach to support comprehension, identity development, and participation (García & Otheguy, 2020). While research in Europe and North America has documented positive outcomes, its application in early childhood education, especially in African contexts, remains limited (Palmer et al., 2022).

South Africa's Constitution and Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) uphold the principle that all learners have the right to education in the language of their choice (RSA, 1996a; Department of Education, 1997). In practice, however, there remains a significant gap between this policy ideal and classroom realities. Although the policy recognises the need to elevate and protect indigenous languages, English continues to dominate as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) across the country, including in early grades (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014; Gordon & Harvey, 2019). This mismatch between learners' home languages and the medium of instruction contributes to academic underachievement and feelings of marginalisation (Owen-Smith, 2009).

Research has consistently shown that children acquire language most effectively through interaction and exposure in their natural environments (Chomsky, 1972; Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). In multilingual households and communities, children can acquire and use multiple languages simultaneously, provided they are given opportunities to interact across their linguistic repertoires (Safitri, 2020). This is especially relevant in South African township contexts, where linguistic diversity is a lived reality. Yet, in many township schools—including those in Soshanguve—English is introduced as the primary LoLT from as early as Grade R, often before children have developed a firm foundation in their home languages (Desai, 2012; Van der Walt, 2016).

The early childhood years represent a critical stage for literacy development, where learners experience rapid growth in vocabulary, oral expression, and emergent reading skills (Kioko, 2015). A disconnect between home and school languages can disrupt this process and impede learners' access to academic literacy (Nag et al., 2019). Despite widespread evidence of the benefits of mother-tongue-based education (Heugh, 2017), parental aspirations for English proficiency and resource limitations in schools continue to reinforce English dominance. Similar tensions are noted globally, in countries such as Canada and the United States, where bilingualism is valued but minority languages often remain marginalised in informal schooling (Paradis & Kirova, 2014; Rodriguez, 2015).

Against this backdrop, translanguaging emerges as a promising pedagogical approach. Rather than forcing learners to operate exclusively in one language, translanguaging recognises and leverages the full linguistic repertoires of multilingual learners (García & Wei, 2014). In the Soshanguve context, where children are exposed to multiple languages at home and in their communities, translanguaging practices offer a way to bridge home and school languages, enhance learner participation, and foster more inclusive early literacy development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research recognises translanguaging as a promising pedagogical approach for supporting early literacy in multilingual settings (García & Wei, 2014; Cummins, 2021; Makalela, 2019). Translanguaging has been defined as the dynamic use of a learner's full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, communicate, and learn (García & Li Wei, 2014). Early childhood research indicates that translanguaging can facilitate comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and learner participation, while also affirming diverse linguistic identities in classroom practices (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016; Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015; Ridley, 2024). Reported strategies include teacher-facilitated shifts between languages to clarify new concepts, the use of the home language during storybook reading, and multimodal scaffolding such as gestures or images combined with translanguaging (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012). However, evidence in this field remains emergent, with much of the scholarship relying on small-scale, context-specific studies that employ diverse methodologies such as case studies, classroom-based ethnographies, and pilot interventions (García & Kleyn, 2016; Conteh & Meier, 2014). While these studies provide valuable insights, the generalisability of findings remains limited, pointing to the need for more systematic, longitudinal, and large-scale investigations.

Research on translanguaging has been growing and is increasingly recognised as a promising pedagogy for multilingual classrooms, including early childhood settings (García & Wei, 2014; Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012; Makalela, 2019). However, the literature is uneven: conceptual and classroom ethnographic work is relatively plentiful, while systematic evidence linking translanguaging to measurable early-literacy outcomes (phonological awareness, decoding, emergent writing, vocabulary growth) is limited. The following sub-sections synthesise the literature under themes that directly map to the article's research questions and identify the specific gaps our study addresses.

Translanguaging in early childhood and Global multilingual contexts

In early childhood, translanguaging has been theorised as both a descriptive lens and an instructional strategy that can create cognitive and socio-affective affordances for young learners (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Canagarajah, 2011). For instance, Creese and Blackledge's (2010) ethnographic work in the UK showed that bilingual teachers used translanguaging to integrate cultural knowledge and literacy learning, creating continuity between home and school

languages. Similarly, Canagarajah (2011) argued that translanguaging is not simply code-switching, but a pedagogical strategy that affirms multilingual learners' identities while also supporting cognitive development. African scholarship situates these ideas within "southern" multilingual realities: Heugh and colleagues argue for frameworks that centre local repertoires and knowledge systems rather than importing monolingual Northern norms (Heugh, 2017; Heugh, 2021). Cummins's work on common underlying proficiency remains a useful theoretical touchstone for explaining how strong L1 foundations can support L2 literacy (Cummins, 2000/2021). Conceptual work is strong, but there is a need for context-specific empirical studies in African township ECE settings that show how those conceptual affordances play out in everyday teaching and learning.

South African research reflects similar dynamics. Studies in peri-urban preschools demonstrate that teachers often employ translanguaging pragmatically clarifying instructions, managing behaviour, or mediating meaning, yet without systematic pedagogical design for literacy outcomes (Probyn, 2019; Hendricks, 2024). This gap highlights the need to move from spontaneous language use towards intentional translanguaging literacy pedagogy. While educators value home languages in principle, limited professional preparation constrains their ability to embed translanguaging within structured literacy practices.

Policy and teachers' implementation of translanguaging strategies during literacy instruction

Existing literature describes several teacher practices that amount to translanguaging in the classroom: deliberate code-switching to clarify vocabulary, home-language scaffolding during story reading, translanguaging during modelling of emergent writing, and multimodal supports (images, gesture, transliteracy resources) used alongside multiple languages (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Lewis et al., 2012; Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015). South African studies show that practitioners often use translanguaging pragmatically to mediate meaning or manage behaviour, but rarely as a systematically planned literacy pedagogical strategy (Probyn, 2019; Makalela, 2019; Hendricks, 2024). Teacher agency and professional learning are repeatedly identified as critical for effective implementation (García & Kleyn, 2016; Makalela, 2019).

Few studies provide lesson-level analyses that document how translanguaging is embedded within sequenceable literacy activities (for example, phoneme-focused work, shared reading, guided writing). There is a limited description of teacher planning documents, lesson designs, or curricular adaptations that intentionally embed translanguaging for specific literacy goals. Empirical evidence from township ECE classrooms, particularly Soshanguve-type multilingual contexts, is scarce. This gap justifies investigating, in situ, the concrete strategies teachers use (planned and emergent) and how these relate to literacy practices and materials.

Despite these conceptual advances, practice often lags policy. South Africa's Language-in-Education Policy (1997) aspires to promote additive bilingualism and parity of esteem across languages, but implementation remains uneven. The dominance of English as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT), often introduced from Grade R, undermines systematic investment in African languages. The Incremental Implementation of African Languages (DBE, 2013) sought to address this imbalance, yet uptake has been limited, particularly in under-resourced schools. Professional development literature points to the need for teacher education programmes that include translanguaging literacies and locally grounded materials (Probyn, 2019; Hendricks, 2024). Yet, policy uptake remains uneven: initiatives like the DBE's Incremental Implementation of African Languages are important but under-resourced in many township contexts. Translanguaging has therefore emerged as a grassroots strategy: a pragmatic response by teachers and learners to bridge home-school linguistic divides in the absence of systemic reform.

Literacy Outcomes and challenges identified by teachers, parents, and learners' artefacts

While research consistently highlights the social and identity-related benefits of translanguaging, such as affirming learners' cultural identities and fostering participation (Li Wei, 2018), its impact on measurable literacy outcomes is less well-documented. Several studies show positive associations between translanguaging and comprehension or engagement, yet explicit links to core literacy skills such as phoneme awareness, decoding, and emergent writing remain under-theorised (Nag, Vagh, Dulay, & Snowling, 2019). Hendricks (2024), for example, found that although translanguaging practices enhanced learner participation across grade bands, there was little direct evidence connecting these practices to improved reading or writing proficiency.

This imbalance reflects a broader tendency in the literature: translanguaging research in early childhood often foregrounds identity, participation, and access to curriculum content, while literacy development outcomes remain secondary. Cummins' (2000) theory of common underlying proficiency suggests that strong first-language foundations support second-language literacy. Yet, as Desai (2012) noted in the South African context, premature transitions to English-medium instruction in Grade 4 undermine the development of academic literacy in both the home language and English. Translanguaging offers a potential mechanism to extend and strengthen learners' L1 while building bridges to English literacy, but systematic research on this dual function remains scarce.

Recent calls in the field recommend more robust research designs that align classroom ethnographies with literacy performance metrics (Van der Walt, 2020). Such designs could clarify whether and how translanguaging strengthens foundational literacy skills in early years education. Furthermore, professional development initiatives for teachers are urgently needed to translate spontaneous, pragmatic translanguaging into deliberate pedagogical practice. Without such interventions, translanguaging risks remaining an ad hoc survival strategy rather than a recognised literacy

pedagogy. Most accounts of “learner experience” are inferred from classroom interaction rather than derived from triangulated sources (parents, teachers, and learner work samples). Very few studies systematically compare perceptions across stakeholders (teachers vs parents) alongside tangible learner artefacts (work samples) to validate claims about learning benefits or constraints. Limited evidence exists about specific literacy skills (e.g., phoneme awareness, decoding) as experienced or evidenced in learners’ work when translinguaging is used. This supports your methodological choice to triangulate teacher interviews, parent perspectives, and learner artefacts to capture both perceived opportunities/challenges and observable literacy indicators.

In summary, the literature reveals both promise and gaps. Translinguaging is increasingly recognised as a culturally sustaining practice that affirms learners’ identities and mediates access to curriculum knowledge. However, its role in fostering measurable literacy outcomes in early childhood remains under-researched, particularly in African multilingual contexts such as Soshanguve. This study contributes to addressing this gap by investigating how teachers and parents perceive and implement translinguaging, and how these practices shape literacy development in early childhood classrooms.

RESEARCH AIM

This study aims to explore the implications of translinguaging practices in early childhood classrooms for literacy development in Soshanguve Township, South Africa.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite South Africa’s progressive language-in-education policies that promote the use of learners’ home languages, the reality in many township schools, such as those in Soshanguve, remains misaligned with policy intentions. Early literacy instruction is still dominated by English, often at the expense of learners’ linguistic repertoires. This creates a tension between policy and practice, where children’s home languages are marginalised in formal learning spaces. Compounding this disconnect, educators often lack a deep understanding of the multilingual literacy practices that students engage with outside of school, particularly in home and community settings, leading to missed opportunities for leveraging these rich linguistic resources in classroom teaching (Sibanda & Kajee, 2019). Research has shown that translinguaging, strategically using multiple languages to mediate meaning, can be a powerful pedagogical resource in multilingual classrooms. However, empirical studies documenting how translinguaging unfolds in early literacy instruction within township contexts remain limited. The disconnect between learners’ multilingual realities at home and the monolingual tendency of formal schooling contributes to challenges in reading development, identity affirmation, and equitable participation in learning. In the context of Soshanguve, where learners navigate multiple indigenous languages alongside English, there is a pressing need to explore how teachers engage (or fail to engage) with translinguaging practices to support early literacy. Without such insights, the potential of translinguaging to bridge home and school literacies risks being overlooked, perpetuating inequalities in literacy outcomes, and reinforcing deficit views of multilingual learners.

RATIONALE

Soshanguve Township, located about 30 km north of Pretoria in Gauteng Province, presents a distinctive context for exploring translinguaging in early childhood education. Established in the early 1970s as a resettlement area for Black communities relocated from Mamelodi and Atteridgeville, particularly those who were not Tswana-speaking, the township was designed to accommodate diverse language groups. Its very name—So-Sha-Ngu-Ve (Sotho, Shangaan/Tsonga, Nguni, Venda)—symbolises its multilingual identity (RealNet, n.d.; University of Pretoria, 2013).

Census data show that Soshanguve remains linguistically heterogeneous: Northern Sotho (28.2%), Setswana (16.7%), Xitsonga (15.0%), isiZulu (13.6%), Sesotho, isiNdebele, and other African languages are widely spoken, while English accounts for less than 2% as a home language (Statistics South Africa, 2011). This diversity has also given rise to Sepitori, an urban lingua franca that blends Sotho-Tswana structures with Nguni and Tsonga lexical influences, reflecting the daily realities of multilingual interaction (Mbatha, 2020).

In this context, formal schooling often privileges English or other standardised languages of learning and teaching (LoLT), leaving a gap between learners’ lived linguistic repertoires and the classroom language environment. Research suggests that translinguaging can serve as a bridge by leveraging home languages alongside the LoLT to enhance comprehension, participation, and identity affirmation (Mahan, 2024). Yet, in Soshanguve, the ways in which teachers and parents perceive and implement translinguaging in the early years remain under-explored. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating translinguaging as a pedagogical practice in early childhood classrooms and examining its influence on literacy development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do teachers implement translinguaging strategies during literacy instruction?
- What opportunities and challenges are identified by teachers, parents, and learners when translinguaging is used to support literacy development?
- What implications do translinguaging practices hold for policy and pedagogy in multilingual early childhood contexts?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in sociocultural theories of language and literacy, which view learning as a socially situated process (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, language is both a cognitive and cultural tool. Translanguaging is conceptualised here not merely as code-switching but as an integrated practice where learners and teachers strategically draw upon multiple languages to support comprehension, critical thinking, and identity affirmation (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The article also engages with the concept of linguistic repertoires, recognising learners' multiple languages as interconnected rather than separate systems.

Translanguaging is framed as a dynamic, pedagogical, and analytic concept that treats speakers' entire linguistic repertoires as resources for meaning making rather than as separated, fixed language systems. García and Otheguy (2019) clarify the conceptual distinctions and overlaps between plurilingualism and translanguaging, arguing that translanguaging foregrounds the unsolidified, practice-based ways learners draw on linguistic resources in situ. Contemporary formulations stress translanguaging's dual character: it is both a descriptive lens for how multilinguals communicate and a pedagogical strategy that can be intentionally deployed to scaffold learning (García & Otheguy, 2019). This reconceptualization shifts emphasis away from rigid language boundaries toward communicative and cognitive affordances offered by multilingual repertoires.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how translanguaging practices shape early literacy in multilingual classrooms in Soshanguve Township. The case study approach was appropriate given the aim of generating in-depth, context-specific insights into teacher practices, stakeholder perceptions, and observable literacy outcomes.

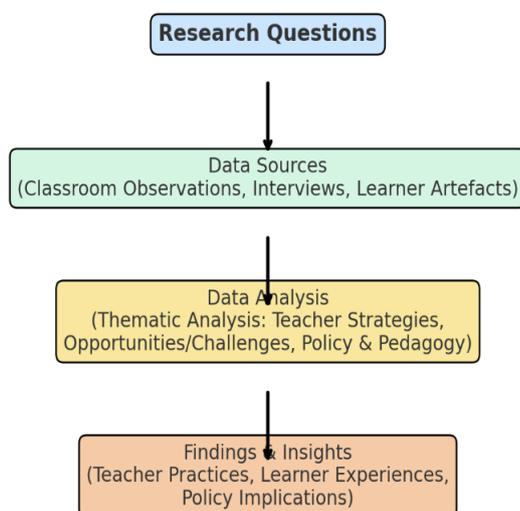


Fig. 1 Methodological framework linking research question, data sources, analysis, and findings

The study was conducted in two early childhood centres situated in Soshanguve, Gauteng Province. These sites were purposively selected as they serve linguistically diverse communities where learners speak multiple African languages alongside English. Participants included: Five early childhood teachers responsible for literacy instruction in Grade R classes. Five parents of enrolled learners, representing varied linguistic backgrounds. Learners' literacy artefacts (storybook retellings, emergent writing samples) were produced during classroom activities.

Data collection

Three data sources were used to ensure triangulation:

- **Classroom observations:** Conducted as non-participant observations, these sessions enabled the researcher to document how Grade R teachers used home language during teaching, and how learners engaged with and responded to instruction. Observations provided first-hand insights into communication patterns, comprehension, and the challenges experienced in using the home language for literacy development.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Individual interviews with teachers allowed for deeper engagement with their pedagogical choices and experiences. Teachers, as curriculum implementers, offered valuable perspectives on learners' progress and challenges. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, ensuring accuracy and minimising researcher bias (Strydom, Schultz & Bezuidenhout, 2014).
- **Focus Group Interviews:** Parent perspectives were gathered through focus groups comprising five participants each, following Krueger and Casey's (2014) recommendation for small, interactive groups. These discussions enabled participants to share collective experiences and reflections on the use of home language in their children's literacy development, fostering collaborative dialogue in a supportive environment.
- **Document Analysis:** Relevant policy documents (e.g., the Constitution of South Africa, the Language in Education Policy of 1996, and the South African Schools Act) and learners' workbooks were analysed to understand the policy context informing classroom practices. Document analysis provided a legislative and curricular backdrop for interpreting observed practices.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically using coding and categorisation techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and focus group discussions were coded to identify patterns and themes related to the role of home language in early literacy. Document analysis further contextualised these findings by linking classroom realities to policy frameworks.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology (Reference: FCRE/PE/STD/2021/03) and the Department of Basic Education. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality through pseudonyms. Data were securely stored and will be destroyed after the prescribed period. Voluntary participation was emphasised, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage without prejudice.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study was conducted in four schools in Soshanguve Township, involving 5 teachers and 5 parents. While the small sample size and single-site context limit generalisability, the study's aim was depth rather than breadth. Data collection was further constrained by COVID-19 restrictions, which necessitated adaptations such as smaller focus groups and occasional online engagement. Delimitations included focusing exclusively on Grade R and one linguistic community, which allowed for a manageable and contextually rich exploration of translanguaging in early literacy.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Implications of Translanguaging for Literacy Development

The study explored the implications of translanguaging practices during early childhood literacy instruction. The data revealed that teachers in township schools, where English is often the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), relied on translanguaging to bridge the gap between learners' home languages and classroom literacy expectations. Three interrelated sub-themes emerged: (i) use of home language as pedagogical scaffolding, (ii) challenges of implementing translanguaging, and (iii) benefits of adopting translanguaging for literacy development. Teachers described how they drew on learners' home languages as pedagogical resources, while also recognising challenges in implementation and highlighting clear benefits.

These findings resonate with García and Wei's (2014) view that translanguaging functions as both a pedagogical and ideological practice that enables learners to mobilise their full linguistic repertoires. Similarly, Makalela (2018) argues that translanguaging offers teachers in multilingual contexts a means of reconciling policy-driven monolingual expectations with the linguistic realities of learners in African classrooms.

Use of Home Language as Pedagogical Scaffolding

Teachers frequently used home languages as scaffolding tools to promote understanding and participation. Strategies included encouraging peer-to-peer interaction in familiar languages, using props and visual aids, and creating extended learning opportunities beyond the classroom. As one teacher reflected, "You must get the learners to interact with themselves... give them topics they are familiar with and let them share" (Teacher 1, T1). Others described a gradual transition process, beginning the year with mother-tongue instruction and gradually incorporating English as learners' confidence increased.

This aligns with research indicating that translanguaging scaffolds cognitive and linguistic development by activating prior linguistic and cultural knowledge (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Probyn, 2019). Within South African contexts, Madiba (2018) and Makalela (2015) have shown that drawing on home languages during early literacy instruction enhances comprehension and vocabulary acquisition while supporting learner identity. García and Lin (2017) similarly argue that translanguaging fosters metacognitive awareness by helping learners to make conceptual links between languages, thus improving comprehension and critical thinking.

The findings therefore affirm that translanguaging creates inclusive learning spaces where learners can draw on familiar linguistic resources to access new knowledge. As Carstens (2022) notes, positioning African languages as pedagogical assets rather than obstacles reframes early literacy instruction as a site of empowerment, where multilingualism becomes a resource for learning rather than a challenge to be managed.

Challenges of Implementing Translanguaging

Despite its pedagogical value, teachers reported substantial challenges in applying translanguaging within linguistically diverse classrooms. Many classrooms included learners who spoke different African languages, and sometimes even within the same family, which complicates teachers' efforts to choose which languages to use for instruction. One teacher explained, "The mother is Tsonga, the father is Pedi... it becomes difficult for us to know exactly which language the child uses" (T6).

These findings echo the challenges documented by Probyn (2015, 2019), who found that teachers in multilingual South African schools often struggle to implement translanguaging effectively due to time pressures, lack of linguistic training, and limited multilingual resources. Heugh (2020) also notes that teachers' linguistic repertoires rarely cover the full range of languages represented in their classrooms, which constrains their ability to use translanguaging strategically.

The shortage of early literacy materials such as storybooks, rhymes, and vocabulary lists in indigenous languages further exacerbates these difficulties (Maseko & Madiba, 2019).

Additionally, Setati-Phakeng and Adler (2018) highlight that policy contradictions often place teachers in a double bind: while multilingual pedagogy is encouraged in theory, assessment and curriculum materials remain predominantly in English. This results in what Makoe and McKinney (2019) describe as a “policy–practice gap,” where teachers resort to translanguaging informally, without institutional support or recognition. These findings underscore the need for systemic interventions that legitimise translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy rather than a remedial or informal practice.

Benefits of Adopting Translanguaging for Literacy Development

Teachers consistently reported enhanced learner inclusion, participation, and comprehension when translanguaging strategies were employed. Learners were more willing to engage, ask questions, and participate in reading and discussion activities. One teacher explained, “The learners feel included when we code switch. Their understanding also improves” (T1). Another highlighted how songs and rhymes in home languages accelerated vocabulary and listening skills (T11).

These outcomes align with international research that identifies translanguaging as a tool for deepening understanding and promoting equitable classroom participation (García & Otheguy, 2020; Wei, 2018). Within African early literacy contexts, Banda (2021) and Busch (2020) report similar findings, showing that translanguaging enhances learners’ confidence and facilitates stronger transfer between home languages and English literacy. By drawing on multiple linguistic resources, learners develop metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic competence, both of which contribute to long-term literacy success (Heugh, 2022).

Beyond academic gains, translanguaging also supported learners’ sense of belonging and identity affirmation. Makoe and McKinney (2019) contend that translanguaging practices validate learners’ linguistic repertoires, fostering epistemic access and linguistic justice. The present study therefore reinforces the growing evidence that translanguaging not only improves literacy outcomes but also contributes to broader goals of social inclusion and equitable learning in multilingual South African classrooms.

Document Analysis

Document analysis revealed notable variation in how schools articulated and implemented language policies. Of the four schools examined, only two had formalised policies, indicating uneven compliance with the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996). In School 1, English functioned as the LoLT, with Sepedi, Xitsonga, and isiZulu offered as additional languages based on demographics and parental choice. In contrast, School 2 adopted Sepedi and Setswana as LoLTs, aligning with the dominant community languages (Motlhaka & Malatji, 2025).

These differences mirror Heugh’s (2020) observation that South African schools often oscillate between the pragmatic appeal of English and the sociocultural value of home languages. Maseko and Madiba (2019) similarly argue that while national policies advocate for multilingualism, implementation remains uneven and driven by parental preference and resource availability. In practice, teachers and learners often employ translanguaging as a bottom-up response to these policy inconsistencies (Makalela, 2018), thereby bridging the gap between official policy and classroom realities.

Observations

Classroom observations further illuminated how language policies translated into pedagogical practice. Across six lessons, teachers routinely used code-switching and translanguaging to facilitate understanding. For instance, one teacher read a story in English and explained each line in isiZulu, while another taught primarily in Xitsonga, introducing English vocabulary gradually to aid comprehension. Learners generally expressed themselves more fluently in their home languages during peer discussions but hesitated when responding in English. This reflects what Busch (2020) describes as a natural linguistic negotiation in early literacy learning.

These findings corroborate Probyn’s (2019) and Makalela’s (2015) studies, which found that translanguaging emerges spontaneously as teachers adapt to learners’ communicative needs. However, classroom environments also conveyed implicit hierarchies of language value: in some schools, educational materials were exclusively in English, while others displayed multilingual resources that celebrated linguistic diversity. This “silent pedagogy” of classroom space, as described by Makoe and McKinney (2019), either reinforces or disrupts dominant ideologies surrounding English as the superior LoLT.

Taken together, the document analysis and classroom observations reveal that translanguaging operates as a pragmatic, grassroots solution that compensates for the inadequacies of rigid language policies. Teachers and learners engage in translanguaging not only to make meaning but to assert their linguistic agency within constrained policy frameworks, thereby bridging the persistent divide between language policy and pedagogical practice.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings reveal that translanguaging, particularly through the deliberate use of home language as pedagogical scaffolding, serves as a powerful approach to supporting literacy development in multilingual early childhood classrooms. Teachers’ strategic movement between English and home languages enabled learners to access complex concepts, engage

meaningfully in classroom dialogue, and build confidence in their literacy abilities. Parents' multilingual practices at home further supported these processes, demonstrating strong continuity between home and school language experiences. However, the study also highlights persistent challenges, including uneven implementation of language policies, resource constraints, and the complexities of managing diverse linguistic backgrounds. These findings highlight that translanguaging should not be viewed as a compensatory practice but as a legitimate and pedagogically grounded strategy for supporting early literacy learning in multilingual contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering these insights, several recommendations were made follows:

- Teacher education and continuous professional development programmes should embed explicit training on translanguaging and home-language scaffolding to equip teachers with the theoretical grounding and practical strategies necessary for multilingual pedagogy.
- Schools and educational authorities adopt flexible language policies that legitimise the use of learners' home languages as instructional resources alongside English, ensuring, coherence between policy and classroom practice.
- The Department of Basic Education should invest in developing and distributing multilingual learning resources that reflect learners lived linguistic realities.
- Structured collaboration between teachers and parents should be encouraged to ensure coherence between home and school literacy practices.
- Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of translanguaging on learners' reading comprehension and writing development to inform sustainable multilingual education strategies.

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