



TWIST

Journal homepage: www.twistjournal.net

Teaching English as a Language or Subject in South Africa

A Pedagogical and Linguistic Dilemma

Ndivhudzannyi M. Ndwamato*

Department of Professional and Curriculum Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education,
University of Venda, Private Bag X5050,
Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa
[*Corresponding author]

Israel C. Mulaudzi

Department of Professional and Curriculum Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education,
University of Venda, Private Bag X5050,
Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa

Rendani M. Makhwathana

Department of Early Childhood Education,
Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education,
University of Venda, Private Bag X5050,
Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa

Abstract

In multilingual South African classrooms, English is expected to serve a dual function: as a subject of academic study and as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 onwards. However, in practice, this duality presents a pedagogical dilemma, as English FAL is often delivered with an emphasis on grammar instruction and assessment preparation rather than real-world language use. This qualitative case study investigates whether English is being taught primarily as a language or a subject in South African schools, using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as its theoretical lens. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, learners, and Curriculum Advisors; classroom observations; and curriculum document analysis. The findings reveal that most teachers, particularly in under-resourced contexts, prioritise textbook-bound, examination-driven instruction, sidelining opportunities for communicative engagement. Learner responses and classroom interactions indicate higher levels of interest and participation when English lessons are interactive, contextually relevant, and encourage authentic use of the language. Curriculum Advisors confirmed that while CAPS promotes communicative competence, its implementation is undermined by overcrowded classrooms, limited pedagogical training, and weak formative assessment practices. Multilingualism in learners' backgrounds was seldom used as an asset, further limiting inclusive language development. The study concludes that English instruction lies along a continuum, with a few schools implementing hybrid approaches that blend academic rigor with functional language use. It recommends increased investment in teacher development, differentiated curriculum support, and policy alignment to empower teachers and learners to achieve both academic and communicative English proficiency.

Keywords

English First Additional Language (FAL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Curriculum implementation, Multilingual classrooms, Pedagogical practices

INTRODUCTION

Language plays an indispensable role not only in communication but also in shaping cognitive and academic development. Language is not merely what we say but also how we think, learn, and live (Johnston, 2023). In South Africa, where multilingualism is both a constitutional right and a lived reality, the role of English in schools is at the

centre of pedagogical and ideological debate. English, despite being the home language of only about 9.6% of South Africans, dominates as the primary medium of instruction from Grade 4 onward (DBE, 2011; Statistics South Africa, 2024). However, the critical question remains: is English being taught as a tool for real-life communication or merely as a subject to pass examinations?

This question is particularly significant in the South African context, where education continues to grapple with the legacy of colonial and apartheid language policies that privileged English while marginalising indigenous languages (Heugh & Mohamed, 2020). Although democratic-era reforms, particularly the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), promote the development of communicative competence in English First Additional Language (FAL) classrooms, practical implementation often leans heavily towards academic instruction focused on grammar rules, comprehension exercises, and literary analysis (Balfour & Mkhize, 2021). The disconnect between policy ideals and classroom practice raises urgent concerns about how English instruction is shaping learners' abilities to function in academic and social settings.

English, in this regard, is not simply a subject of study, but the gateway to curriculum access, higher education, and economic participation. Learners who are not functionally proficient in English are likely to struggle across subjects, as most teaching and learning occur in English beyond the Foundation Phase (Hessel & Strand, 2023). However, many learners, particularly those from rural public and under-resourced schools, report limited opportunities to use English meaningfully beyond the rigid confines of textbook learning (Kukulska-Hulme, Dawadi, Giri, Gaved, Khan, Bedri, Devkota, & Niane, 2024; Singh, 2024). This has implications not only for language development but also for confidence, learner engagement, and identity formation in multilingual settings.

Recent studies in language education advocate for a shift from traditional structuralist models of language teaching towards more communicative, learner-centred, and context-responsive approaches (Diyessa & Woldearegawie, 2025; Enemuoh, 2022). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), task-based learning, and content-integrated instruction are recommended for developing functional language skills and intercultural competence (Lafon & Webb, 2022). In the South African context, teachers operate under significant constraints, such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient training, and systemic inequities, which often reinforce didactic, examination-driven approaches (Spaull, 2015; van der Berg & Hofmeyr, 2018).

In light of this pedagogical dissonance between progressive language education theories and prevailing classroom realities, this study seeks to explore the extent to which English is taught in South African schools as a language for communication versus a subject for academic attainment. It interrogates how English is taught in selected schools by examining the pedagogical approaches employed by teachers and the ways in which Curriculum Advisors interpret and implement the curriculum. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand learners' experiences of English instruction and how they perceive its relevance to their daily communication needs. In doing so, it aims to identify the systemic and contextual factors, such as multilingual classroom dynamics, policy demands, and school resources, that influence the teaching and learning of English. The findings are intended to illuminate the persistent tension between curriculum policy and actual classroom practice, with broader implications for learner outcomes, teacher development, and the future of language-in-education reform in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review, which covers the conceptualisation of English as a language versus a subject, curriculum policy and interpretation, pedagogical approach in practice, learner experience and communication competence, language, identity, and equity, and the role of teacher training and professional support.

Conceptualising English as a language versus a subject

The distinction between teaching English as a language for communication and as an academic subject is fundamental to understanding English instruction in multilingual contexts such as South Africa. Teaching English as a language prioritises authentic communication, contextualised interaction, and the development of fluency, in line with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Basher, Hong, Abdullah, Yunus, Hashim, & Sunandar, 2025). Conversely, treating English as a subject tends to emphasise discrete linguistic components—such as grammar, vocabulary memorisation, literary analysis, and structured writing—frequently assessed through summative examinations (Phakiti & Leung, 2024).

This dichotomy becomes particularly evident in South African classrooms, where English is introduced as a First Additional Language (FAL) but simultaneously assumes the role of the primary Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 onwards (DBE, 2023). This dual role places considerable pedagogical pressure on educators to balance the imperatives of academic literacy with the necessity for learners to develop communicative competence. Nevertheless, as Heugh (2020) and Balfour and Mkhize (2021) contend, prevailing instructional practices tend to favour a subject-based approach, thereby constraining learners' opportunities for meaningful communicative engagement. Positioned within this tension, the present study seeks to interrogate current instructional realities and contribute toward the advancement of a more contextually attuned and communicatively robust model of English language education.

Curriculum policy and interpretation

South Africa's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) advocates for a language-in-education policy that promotes multilingualism and communicative competence (DBE, 2023). The English First Additional Language (FAL)

curriculum integrates structural and communicative dimensions, encouraging activities that involve speaking, listening, reading, and writing. However, its implementation varies significantly across schools and provinces. Research indicates that many teachers misinterpret the CAPS document due to limited professional development and ambiguity in curriculum language (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024). Consequently, instruction often prioritises examinable components—particularly grammar and comprehension—at the expense of oral interaction and project-based learning. Hidayat and Mason (2023) found that rural public school teachers predominantly perceive English as a technical subject, with little focus on communicative use. This reflects broader concerns regarding policy-practice gaps, inadequate training, and systemic disparities (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025).

Pedagogical approaches in practice

Teachers' pedagogical choices are closely tied to their perceptions of English's role in the classroom. In many South African schools, structural and behaviourist models prevail, characterised by teacher-centred instruction and a strong emphasis on grammar (Carilo, 2024). These approaches are often favoured in overcrowded, resource-constrained settings due to their manageability, yet they inadequately support the development of communicative competence. In contrast, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and task-based learning conceptualise language use as a social and cognitive process, promoting negotiation of meaning, collaboration, and contextualised interaction (Berezenko, Cherkhava, & Musiienko, 2022). While CLT has been more widely adopted in private, well-resourced schools, its implementation in under-resourced contexts remains limited. Sultana and Fang (2024) note that many teachers lack the confidence and proficiency to apply communicative strategies, particularly when English is not their first language. Moreover, high-stakes assessment regimes that prioritise written testing further marginalise speaking and listening activities (Oo, Alonzo, Ei, & Marynowski, 2024), reinforcing the notion of English as an examinable subject rather than a practical communicative tool.

Learner experience and communicative competence

Learner experience is a critical indicator of the effectiveness of English instruction. Research reveals that learners, particularly those whose home language is neither English nor Afrikaans, often struggle to engage meaningfully with English outside the confines of the classroom (Makalela, 2023). Limited opportunities for spontaneous language use hinder fluency, confidence, and the ability to transfer classroom learning to real-world contexts. The development of communicative competence—defined by Canale and Swain (1980) as contextually appropriate language use—requires sustained, meaningful interaction. However, in resource-constrained schools, learners participate minimally in speaking activities and rely heavily on rote memorisation, undermining their functional proficiency (Theriana, Fitriati, Haryanti, & Rustipa, 2025). Conversely, learner-centred practices such as group discussions, role plays, and content-based instruction enhance motivation, language awareness, and autonomy (Snow & Brinton, 2023). Yet, the adoption of these practices is largely shaped by teachers' pedagogical orientations and the level of institutional support available.

Language, identity, and equity

English instruction in South Africa is intrinsically linked to broader socio-political issues of language, identity, and equity. The dominant status of English in education often reinforces historical inequalities, particularly disadvantaging learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Heugh, 2020). When English is taught as a detached academic subject, it risks alienating learners and marginalising their linguistic identities. Alternatively, positioning English as a communicative and expressive tool enables critical engagement and knowledge access. Scholars advocate for a hybrid model that balances academic rigour with culturally responsive, communicative practices (Dahmardeh & Mahdikhani, 2025; Dewi, Hakim, & Djafar, 2025), aligning with Vygotskian principles of scaffolded interaction (Remorosa et al., 2024).

The role of teacher training and professional support

Teachers serve as mediators of curriculum intent and gatekeepers of language pedagogy; however, inadequate teacher preparedness remains a significant barrier to implementing communicative and inclusive English instruction. The Department of Basic Education (2023) emphasises the need for sustained professional development in multilingual strategies, task-based learning, and formative assessment. Nikouee (2021) advocates for equipping educators to transition from monologic, rules-based methods to dialogic, learner-centred approaches. While initiatives such as professional learning communities and peer collaboration show promise (Banda & Mwanza, 2021), their implementation across the education system remains inconsistent.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how English is taught in South African schools—whether as a communicative language or primarily as an examinable subject. The case study methodology was appropriate for generating rich, contextually grounded insights into pedagogical practices (Yin, 2018). Anchored in a qualitative paradigm, the study sought to uncover the meanings, experiences, and interpretations of teachers, learners, and curriculum officials regarding English instruction (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Cases were drawn from public schools in varied socio-economic and geographic contexts to explore how institutional factors shape English FAL implementation.

Research participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse, information-rich perspectives across the teaching and learning continuum (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample comprised eight English FAL teachers, four Curriculum Advisors, and eight Grade 4–9 learners from four schools representing public sectors. Teachers were selected based on teaching experience, geographical distribution, and voluntary participation, while Curriculum Advisors were included for their strategic roles in curriculum implementation. Learners were chosen to reflect gender and linguistic diversity. Although not statistically representative, the sample enabled maximum variation and triangulation, enhancing the study's transferability to similar multilingual, resource-constrained contexts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant institutional ethics review board. Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the Department of Basic Education and participating schools. All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from adults, while parental consent and child assent were secured for learners under 18. Confidentiality was upheld through pseudonyms and secure data handling, in adherence to ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice (BERA, 2018).

Data collection

To ensure trustworthiness and analytical depth, the study employed methodological triangulation consistent with qualitative research principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, Curriculum Advisors, and learners; classroom observations using a structured schedule; and document analysis of lesson plans, assessments, textbooks, and the CAPS policy. These methods explored pedagogical practices, curriculum interpretation, and language use. Field notes and analytic memos further captured contextual nuances and emerging patterns, strengthening the study's interpretive validity.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework, was employed to analyse qualitative data collected from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. The process began with familiarisation through transcription, repeated reading, and annotation, followed by applying both inductive and deductive coding. Codes such as "*grammar-focused instruction*," "*learner talk*," and "*policy-practice gap*" were developed and grouped into broader themes, including "English as academic content" and "*communicative competence*." NVivo software facilitated systematic coding and data management. Themes were reviewed and refined for coherence and relevance. Within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted to explore patterns across varied school contexts.

Trustworthiness and credibility

To enhance credibility, the study employed triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, as well as across participant groups. Member checking with selected participants validated interpretations, while peer debriefing with language education experts refined themes and mitigated bias. Transferability was supported through thick descriptions, and an audit trail was maintained to ensure dependability and confirmability of the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were collected through a variety of instruments, which all aimed to establish whether English is taught merely as a subject or as a springboard for effective language usage. The findings and the discussions thereon are presented hereunder.

Findings from semi-structured

Interviews were conducted with the teachers, curriculum advisors, and learners. The findings were as follows:

Group A: English FAL teachers (T1–T8)

Theme 1 Group A: Understanding English as a language vs. a subject

Teachers' understandings of teaching English as a language versus as a subject reveal significant conceptual divergence, which profoundly influences pedagogical choices and classroom practices. Some teachers expressed a communicative orientation, equating language teaching with the development of learners' ability to use English in authentic, real-life contexts. For example, one participant noted, "Teaching it as a language is about helping learners use English in real life—to think and communicate" (T1), reflecting the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasise interaction and contextualised language use as central to cognitive and linguistic development (Basher et al., 2025).

Conversely, other participants adopted a structuralist perspective, viewing English instruction as synonymous with textbook adherence and the mastery of discrete language components. As one teacher remarked, "To me, it's all the same because we teach what's in the textbook" (T5), aligning with behaviourist traditions that emphasise grammar, vocabulary, and rule-based instruction (Phakiti & Leung, 2024). This juxtaposition reflects a deeper conceptual

misalignment rooted in inadequate teacher training and limited professional development opportunities (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). Structural constraints such as high-stakes assessment, rigid curricula, and insufficient pedagogical support further exacerbate the divide, compelling teachers to adopt subject-oriented models that prioritise examinable content over functional language use.

These inconsistencies resonate with national challenges in curriculum interpretation and teacher agency. Although CAPS promotes integrated, communicative language instruction, its successful enactment largely depends on individual teachers' interpretive capacity and pedagogical autonomy (DBE, 2023). As Diyessa and Woldearegawie (2025) argue, teachers' epistemological beliefs interact with systemic factors to shape whether English is constructed as a communicative tool or an academic subject. This theme thus underscores the need for sustained investment in teacher education that fosters conceptual clarity, professional reflexivity, and the capacity to operationalise English as a means of social, cognitive, and linguistic empowerment (Hessel & Strand, 2023).

Theme 2 Group A: Instructional focus in the classroom

Teachers widely acknowledged that their instructional approaches are heavily influenced by assessment demands, often to the detriment of communicative language development. One teacher stated, "I teach to the ANA and SBA requirements" (T4), while another noted, "I want them to pass, so I stick to what's tested—mostly reading and writing" (T6). This assessment-driven pedagogy reflects a structuralist orientation, privileging grammatical accuracy and comprehension over spontaneous language use (Phakiti & Leung, 2024). Such practices diverge from the communicative goals outlined in the English FAL curriculum, which emphasises integrated, learner-centred instruction (DBE, 2023). These findings align with research that links systemic constraints—overcrowding, resource shortages, and exam pressure—to the perpetuation of didactic teaching models (Sultana & Fang, 2024; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). As a result, learners are deprived of meaningful opportunities to develop communicative competence, a foundational skill for both language acquisition and academic achievement (Diyessa & Woldearegawie, 2025).

Theme 3 Group A: Use of communicative activities

Although many teachers demonstrated conceptual alignment with communicative English instruction, they reported substantial implementation challenges. One teacher remarked, "We do role plays, dialogues, and group discussions when possible, especially before exams" (T3), indicating that communicative practices are conditional and often tied to assessment cycles. Others cited structural barriers, including limited time and inadequate classroom space: "There's no space or time. It's mostly textbook work and worksheets" (T5). These findings underscore the persistent gap between curricular intentions and classroom realities, particularly in under-resourced, multilingual contexts (Probyn, 2021; Makalela, 2020). While the CLT framework promotes authentic, interactive learning, its application hinges on enabling conditions such as manageable class sizes, sufficient teacher support, and flexible timetabling (Basher et al., 2025). The intermittent use of communicative strategies reflects teachers' pedagogical willingness constrained by systemic pressures, affirming broader critiques of policy-practice misalignment in South African education (Spaull, 2022; Sultana & Fang, 2024).

Theme 4 Group A: CAPS guidance and implementation

Teachers conveyed divergent perspectives on the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), revealing significant tensions between curricular structure and pedagogical implementation. While CAPS was acknowledged as comprehensive and well-organised, many participants perceived it as prescriptive and lacking in practical guidance. One teacher remarked, "CAPS tells us what to teach, but not how to make learners speak or feel confident using English" (T1), illustrating the disconnect between policy intent and classroom enactment. Another noted, "It's too packed. I rush through topics just to stay on track" (T6), pointing to the constraints imposed by rigid pacing schedules that hinder depth and learner engagement. These concerns align with critiques of CAPS as privileging content coverage over learner-centred pedagogy (Reyneke & Blignaut, 2020). Despite its communicative goals, the curriculum offers limited methodological scaffolding, resulting in varied and often regressive implementation (Balfour & Mkhize, 2021; Spaull, 2022). Addressing this requires targeted professional development, curriculum mediation, and contextual adaptability to support effective pedagogical enactment.

Theme 5 Group A: Challenges with diverse language backgrounds

Multilingualism emerged as a notable challenge in English instruction, particularly in classrooms with linguistically diverse learners. Teachers reported that varying home languages often hindered learners' comprehension of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). One teacher observed, "Some learners struggle because they speak different languages at home" (T7), while another admitted, "I sometimes explain in isiZulu because they just don't get the English" (T3). Although code-switching serves a pragmatic role, it frequently reflects a lack of institutional support and training in multilingual pedagogy. This aligns with Makalela's (2020) call for translanguaging approaches that leverage learners' linguistic repertoires. However, as Lafon and Webb (2022) contend, without formal recognition and structured support, such practices remain reactive. Addressing this requires curriculum and professional development models that affirm linguistic diversity as a pedagogical resource rather than a constraint.

Group B: Curriculum Advisors (A1–A4)

Theme 1 (Group B): Positioning of English in the curriculum

Curriculum Advisors unanimously recognised the dual function of English within the South African education system—as both a standalone subject and the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 onwards. Nonetheless, they expressed concern that English is frequently reduced to a subject-focused approach, neglecting its communicative and cross-curricular roles. One advisor noted, “English is both a subject and the language of learning, but it ends up treated more as a subject in many schools” (A1). This reflects a broader policy-practice disconnect, where curricular goals are narrowly interpreted due to assessment pressures (Probyn, 2021; Spaull, 2022). Consequently, communicative competence and academic literacy development are constrained, undermining learners’ broader educational advancement in multilingual contexts (DBE, 2023; Basher et al., 2025).

Theme 2 (Group B): Guidance provided to teachers

Curriculum Advisors expressed concern regarding the limited and inconsistent pedagogical support provided to teachers in implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). While CAPS promotes communicative competence as a central instructional objective, participants noted that teachers often receive abstract, theory-based guidance with minimal practical relevance. One advisor remarked, “We encourage practical teaching, but many default to drilling grammar because of assessment pressure” (A2), reflecting a common reversion to traditional methods. Another advisor highlighted the geographic disparity in support: “Workshops and training talk about communicative approaches, but implementation is limited — especially in rural areas” (A4). This reinforces the broader issue of policy-practice misalignment in curriculum reform (Reyneke & Blignaut, 2020). Under pressure from high-stakes assessments, teachers tend to favour transmissive approaches that align with examinable content (Phakiti & Leung, 2024). Moreover, professional development remains episodic and workshop-based, lacking the continuity required for paradigm shifts. Research affirms that sustained, classroom-embedded training—featuring mentorship, peer collaboration, and feedback—is critical for effective CLT adoption (Sultana & Fang, 2024).

Theme 4 (Group B): Training and support mechanisms

Advisors highlighted critical limitations in the professional development and support mechanisms available to English teachers, noting that training often prioritises curriculum coverage over pedagogical skill. One advisor stated, “Most training focuses on curriculum delivery, not pedagogy. Teachers often ask for help with how to teach, not just what to teach” (A1), underscoring a disconnect between teacher needs and training design. This lack of pedagogical focus leaves many educators struggling to translate CAPS intentions—particularly its communicative objectives—into effective classroom practices.

The situation is further exacerbated in rural public and under-resourced contexts, where support is described as “especially thin” (A4). This reflects broader educational disparities in South Africa, where unequal access to sustained professional development hampers curriculum implementation (Spaull, 2022; Sultana & Fang, 2024). Without equitable, classroom-based training that prioritises both content and method, teachers remain ill-equipped to navigate the complex demands of English as both a subject and LoLT in multilingual classrooms.

Theme 5 (Group B): Challenges observed in implementation

Curriculum Advisors identified several systemic barriers that hinder the effective implementation of English instruction as envisioned in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Key obstacles included overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher proficiency in English, and the expansive, demanding curriculum. One advisor noted, “There’s a serious mismatch between CAPS ideals and school realities” (A3), highlighting a persistent disconnect between curriculum policy and classroom practice. Large class sizes inhibit interactive, learner-centred instruction, while insufficient teacher language competence restricts their capacity to model fluent English or facilitate communicative tasks. These constraints are particularly pronounced in rural schools, where infrastructure, resources, and professional support are often inadequate (Spaull, 2022; Diyessa & Woldearegawie, 2025). Consequently, English teaching frequently defaults to decontextualised, content-heavy instruction focused on examination preparation rather than communicative competence. This theme underscores the necessity of systemic reforms, including infrastructure development, targeted teacher language training, and curriculum recalibration, to ensure that the communicative goals of English instruction are meaningfully realised within diverse classroom contexts.

Theme 1 (Group C): Learner enjoyment and challenges

Learners expressed a mix of enthusiasm and frustration in their experiences with English, indicating a surface-level engagement that reflects both interest and linguistic struggle. Many enjoyed narrative elements such as stories and poems, with one learner sharing, “I like English stories and poems, but I find grammar hard” (L1). Another commented, “English is fun, but some words are too big, and I don’t understand them” (L4), highlighting vocabulary as a persistent barrier to deeper comprehension and fluency.

These insights align with research showing that while learners may be positively disposed towards English, their limited exposure and vocabulary breadth hinder sustained engagement and confidence (Makalela, 2020; Hessel & Strand,

2023). The early stages of learning English as a First Additional Language (FAL) are often marked by enthusiasm but constrained by cognitive overload and inadequate scaffolding. This points to a need for vocabulary-rich, learner-centred instruction that builds from enjoyment to functional mastery through gradual, contextualised language development.

Theme 2 (Group C): English use outside of lessons

Learners indicated that their use of English is largely confined to the classroom, with minimal application in informal or social contexts. As one learner noted, “Only during English period. We speak Setswana outside class” (L2). Another shared, “Sometimes we mix English and Zulu when we talk to the teacher” (L8), reflecting both limited immersion and the adaptive use of translanguaging strategies in interaction.

This compartmentalised language use illustrates the broader challenge of fostering functional communicative competence in environments where English is not the dominant social language. Research confirms that language acquisition is strengthened through frequent, meaningful use, both within and beyond formal instruction (Makalela, 2020; Basher et al., 2025). The learners’ restricted exposure constrains opportunities for natural language development and fluency building. This finding highlights the need for classroom practices and school-wide initiatives that encourage sustained English use in diverse contexts to extend learning beyond the lesson and into daily communication.

Theme 3 (Group C): Confidence in expressing ideas

Learners exhibited varying levels of confidence in using English for oral communication, influenced by individual readiness, exposure, and available support structures. Several learners expressed apprehension and fear of making errors, with one stating, “I’m scared to speak English because I don’t want to say it wrong” (L1). Such anxiety, common in additional language contexts, is often intensified by rigid instructional settings, peer judgment, and limited opportunities for oral practice, thereby constraining fluency development (Diyessa & Woldearegawie, 2025). Conversely, other learners reported increased confidence when engaged in structured, supportive activities. For instance, one learner remarked, “Yes, I can speak English well, especially in presentations” (L7), underscoring the value of task-based and scaffolded oral exercises. These findings highlight that learner confidence is not merely an innate trait but a product of the pedagogical environment. As supported by Hessel and Strand (2023) and Basher et al. (2025), cultivating linguistically rich, psychologically safe classrooms is vital to promoting communicative competence.

Theme 4 (Group C): Dominant classroom activities

Learners’ accounts of classroom experiences reveal a predominant reliance on traditional, form-focused instructional methods. Activities such as grammar drills, comprehension exercises, and note copying were frequently cited. Statements like “We do grammar worksheets and read stories” (L4) and “We copy notes and do comprehension most of the time” (L6) point to a text-based, teacher-centred pedagogy. This indicates a persistent structuralist orientation in teaching practice, despite curricular mandates to promote communicative competence. Although speaking tasks were mentioned, their occurrence appeared sporadic and marginal. One learner noted, “Sometimes we act out a dialogue, and I like that” (L5), suggesting that when included, communicative tasks foster engagement. However, their limited and inconsistent use hinders oral language development. These findings align with research indicating that under pressure from large classes and assessment demands, teachers default to grammar-intensive instruction (Phakiti & Leung, 2024; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). A pedagogical shift is needed to integrate speaking as a routine component of instruction.

Theme 5 (Group C): Impact of English lessons on skills

Learners expressed varied perceptions regarding the impact of English instruction on their language development, revealing inconsistencies in pedagogical emphasis and learner outcomes. Several learners reported improvement in receptive language skills, particularly reading and comprehension. For instance, one learner remarked, “I understand English better now, but I still can’t speak it well” (L2), highlighting a common gap between passive language acquisition and active communicative competence. Others attributed progress in oral proficiency to intentional pedagogical strategies, such as when “the teacher makes us talk in English” (L7), suggesting that structured speaking opportunities enhance both confidence and language use. However, not all learners perceived English instruction as beneficial. One noted, “Not really. I just memorize for tests” (L3), underscoring how assessment-driven practices hinder the internalisation and functional application of English. These findings affirm critiques in existing literature that exam-oriented instruction often compromises the development of communicative skills (Reyneke & Blignaut, 2020; Sultana & Fang, 2024). Ultimately, pedagogical choices significantly mediate learners’ language development and engagement.

Findings from classroom observations

This observation report presents findings from 30-minute classroom observations conducted with eight English First Additional Language (FAL) teachers in South African multilingual school contexts. The data collected aligns with four core research objectives: how English is taught, pedagogical strategies used, learner experience, and systemic/contextual factors influencing classroom practice.

Observation Theme: Teaching English – Language use vs. academic subject

Classroom observations revealed a distinct dichotomy in the conceptualisation and delivery of English instruction—either as a functional communicative tool or as an examinable academic subject. In approximately half of the observed

classrooms, instruction was primarily centred on grammar drills, comprehension exercises, and textbook-based activities. These lessons were predominantly teacher-led, with minimal learner interaction, reflecting a structuralist approach that prioritised correctness and assessment preparedness. In such contexts, English was positioned more as a subject of study than as a medium of communication.

In contrast, two classrooms—located in better-resourced environments—employed more communicative methodologies. Teachers facilitated spontaneous dialogue, peer interaction, and contextualised tasks such as role-plays, consistently using English for instruction and classroom discourse. These practices aligned with the communicative goals of the curriculum and fostered psychologically safe environments conducive to language experimentation.

A third, hybrid model emerged in some classrooms, where explicit grammar instruction was complemented by interactive tasks. While this integration indicates movement toward communicative competence, it also underscores the challenge of reconciling curriculum coverage with functional language use. Overall, the observed variation reflects broader systemic tensions and highlights the influence of teacher training, confidence, and contextual support (Makalela, 2020; Spaul, 2022).

Observation Theme: Pedagogical practices and curriculum interpretation

Classroom observations revealed significant disparities in pedagogical approaches and curriculum interpretation. The majority of classrooms (five out of eight) demonstrated predominantly teacher-centred practices, characterised by chalkboard instruction, dictated notes, and didactic lecturing. These environments afforded limited learner agency and interaction, reflecting a transmission model of education in which English was delivered rather than co-constructed. Such methods often correlated with strict textbook adherence and minimal curriculum adaptation, particularly in under-resourced or rural contexts.

Conversely, three classrooms implemented more learner-centred approaches, including group discussions, oral presentations, and dialogic questioning. These settings fostered greater learner engagement and critical thinking and were generally located in schools where teachers benefited from ongoing professional development or collaborative peer networks. Teachers in these contexts flexibly interpreted the curriculum, incorporating learners' lived experiences, local contexts, and interdisciplinary themes to enhance relevance.

Use of digital technology was observed in only two classrooms, underscoring the persistent digital divide in public schools. Similarly, formative assessment strategies—such as peer feedback and real-time questioning—were observed in just two lessons, with most assessment practices remaining summative and outcome-oriented. These findings underscore the need for pedagogical capacity building, equitable resource allocation, and expanded access to professional development (Reyneke & Blignaut, 2020; Spaul, 2022).

Observation Theme: Learner engagement and relevance of instruction

Learner engagement was markedly influenced by the pedagogical strategies employed and the contextual relevance of instructional content. In classrooms where communicative methodologies were utilised, learners exhibited heightened participation, confidence, and enthusiasm. They actively posed questions, expressed personal opinions, and engaged in peer interactions using English in meaningful, contextually embedded ways. These environments frequently incorporated locally relevant themes and interactive activities—such as role-plays, storytelling, and discussions of everyday experiences—thereby enhancing learners' emotional and cognitive connection to the language.

Conversely, classrooms dominated by traditional, teacher-centred approaches displayed largely passive learner behaviour. English use was limited to rehearsed or teacher-prompted utterances, with minimal opportunities for spontaneous expression. Instruction in these contexts often lacked cultural or contextual integration, resulting in diminished learner motivation and communicative development. Peer interaction in English was noted in only three classrooms, underscoring the restricted space for active language use.

These findings affirm that learner engagement and communicative proficiency are strengthened when instruction centres learners as active participants and situates language within their lived experiences (Hessel & Strand, 2023; Makalela, 2020).

Observation Theme: Systemic and contextual influences

A range of systemic and contextual factors was found to significantly shape English instruction across classrooms. While all classrooms had basic textbooks, only two were equipped with digital media, and visual aids such as posters or charts were largely absent, resulting in a reliance on text-based instruction with minimal multimodal support. Class sizes ranged from 30 to 48 learners, with larger groups limiting interaction and individualised feedback, thereby reinforcing teacher-centred pedagogies. Although multilingualism was evident in learner interactions, only two teachers employed translanguaging strategies, despite CAPS policy supporting inclusive language practices. Oral activities were marginalised, with time predominantly allocated to written tasks. Infrastructural issues, including power outages and external noise, further disrupted instruction. These findings underscore how structural barriers—such as resource deficits, overcrowding, and limited pedagogical support—impede the effective implementation of communicative and inclusive English instruction, particularly in under-resourced contexts (Spaul, 2022; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

A comparative analysis reveals notable tensions between stakeholder perspectives on communicative competence. While teachers acknowledged the value of speaking activities, they cited curriculum pressure and resource constraints as barriers to consistent implementation. Curriculum Advisors, on the other hand, emphasised insufficient pedagogical training as a key reason for the neglect of speaking skills, noting that CAPS guidance lacks practical models. Learners, in contrast, reported enjoying rare speaking tasks like dialogues and role plays but felt these were infrequent and insufficient for real language development. This triangulated divergence illustrates how systemic constraints intersect with professional development gaps to shape learner experiences. It also highlights the missed opportunity for language immersion due to weak curriculum operationalisation and inconsistent pedagogical support.

A triangulated analysis of classroom observations and interview data reveals alignment and divergence across stakeholder experiences. While many teachers acknowledged the value of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), observed practices remained predominantly grammar-focused and textbook-driven, reflecting limited pedagogical implementation. Learners reported enjoying speaking activities like role plays, yet these were rarely observed, indicating they are occasional rather than embedded. Curriculum Advisors highlighted the marginalisation of oral skills in assessment—a concern echoed in classrooms where writing dominated and oral expression was neither systematically taught nor assessed. Variability in teaching styles, from rigid instruction to more flexible, hybrid approaches, reflected the broader continuum reported in interviews. This suggests that the practical application of CLT depends heavily on individual teacher capacity, contextual resources, and curriculum interpretation, highlighting a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research project did not receive any financial support from public, commercial, or non-profit organisations.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, findings, or publication of this research. No competing financial, professional, or personal interests have influenced the design, execution, or reporting of this study.

REFERENCES

1. Balfour, R., & Mkhize, N. (2021). Language ideologies and teaching English in South African schools. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(2), 110–124. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i2.8>
2. Basher, N. N., Hong, L. J., Abdullah, N. S., Yunus, M. M., Hashim, H., & Sunandar, A. (2025). Empowering communication: A conceptual exploration of communicative language teaching. *Pena International Journal of Media, Journalism and Mass Communication*, 1(1), 10–28.
3. BERA. (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (4th ed.). British Educational Research Association.
4. Berezenko, V., Cherkhava, O., & Musiienko, Y. (2022). Communicative language teaching approach in promoting the linguistic competence of EFL learners. *Advanced Education*, 20, 88–96.
5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2021). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
7. Dahmardeh, M., & Mahdikhani, A. (2025). The hybrid model for ELT: Balancing language proficiency and cultural representation in Iranian schools abroad. *Language, Identity and the Digital Realm*, 1(1), 59–76.
8. DBE (Department of Basic Education). (2011). *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): English FAL Grades 4–9*. Government Printer.
9. DiyesEnemuoh, C. (2022). *Context-responsive learner-centered education in a secondary school* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).
10. Hessel, A. K., & Strand, S. (2023). Proficiency in English is a better predictor of educational achievement than English as an Additional Language (EAL). *Educational Review*, 75(4), 763–786.
11. Heugh, K. (2020). Language and inequality: Global challenges to multilingual education. *International Review of Education*, 66(5–6), 715–738. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09836-5>
12. Johnston, P. (2023). *Opening minds: Using language to change lives*. Routledge.
13. Lafon, M., & Webb, V. (2022). Educational language policies in South Africa: Ideals and realities. *Language Matters*, 53(1), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2022.2037357>
14. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
15. Makalela, L. (2023). Merging English home language and first additional language curricula: Implications for future quality assurance practices. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 41(1), 76–87.
16. Moll, L. C. (2020). Vygotsky and education. In C. D. Lee, N. H. Spencer, & L. Thompson (Eds.), *Foundations of learning and development* (pp. 41–59). Routledge.
17. Moyo, T. (2024). Pedagogical challenges in teaching English in rural South African schools. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 42(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2024.0001>

18. Nikouee, M. (2021). Grammar practice and communicative language teaching: Groundwork for an investigation into the concept of transfer-appropriateness. [Manuscript in preparation or unpublished].
19. Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
20. Phakiti, A., & Leung, C. (2024). *Assessment for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
21. Probyn, M. (2021). Teaching in a second language in South African classrooms: Policy, practice, and challenges. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 24(4), 501–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1548558>
22. Remorosa, M. M. R., Capili, S. R., Decir, E. G. B., Delacruz, J. B., Balase, M. M. H., & Escarlos, G. S. (2024). Vygotsky's social development theory: The role of social interaction and language in cognitive development. *International Journal of All Research Writings*, 6(6), 1–4.
23. Reyneke, M., & Blignaut, S. (2020). Teachers' interpretation of curriculum reform: The case of CAPS English FAL. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n4a1740>
24. Richards, J. C. (2021). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
25. Sepadi, M., & Molapo, K. (2024). Exploring teacher understanding of curriculum and assessment policy statement document implementation in South African schools. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, Article 1354959. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1354959>
26. Snow, A. M., & Brinton, D. M. (2023). *Content-based instruction: What every ESL teacher needs to know*. University of Michigan Press.
27. Spaull, N. (2015). South Africa's education crisis: The quality of education in South Africa 1994–2011. Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers.
28. Spaull, N. (2022). Education and inequality: Examining the language gap in South African schools. *Journal of African Education*, 3(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2022.1994856>
29. Statistics South Africa. (2024). Cultural dynamics in South Africa: A 26-year transformation (Census 2022 thematic series). Stats SA.
30. Sultana, S., & Fang, F. (2024). English as the medium of instruction and mother-tongue-based translanguaging: Challenges and prospects for tertiary education in Bangladesh and China. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 104, Article 102951.
31. Theriana, A., Fitriati, S. W., Haryanti, R. P., & Rustipa, K. (2025). *Teacher agency and English teaching in Kurikulum Merdeka*. PT. Star Digital Publishing.
32. UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707>
33. van der Berg, S., & Hofmeyr, H. (2018). Education in South Africa: An incomplete transition — Overcoming the legacy of exclusion. World Bank.
34. van der Merwe, A. (2021). Language teaching approaches in high-stakes environments: The South African experience. *Journal of Language Teaching*, 55(2), 88–102. <https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v55i2.5>
35. Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.