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Unlocking Language Potential: How Mother Tongue Shapes English Acquisition in Rural Grade 1 Classrooms of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of learners' mother tongues on the acquisition of English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) among Grade 1 learners in South Africa's rural Klein Letaba Circuit, Limpopo Province. Guided by Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study employs an interpretivist qualitative design involving eight purposefully selected Grade 1 teachers from multilingual classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed to identify patterns of phonological, grammatical, and lexical transfer, alongside teachers' pedagogical responses. Findings reveal that learners frequently transfer L1 sound systems and grammatical structures into English, resulting in predictable decoding, pronunciation, and syntactic errors. Teachers report that strategic translanguaging—purposeful alternation between English and local languages such as Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi—enhances comprehension, pronunciation, and learner engagement. Teachers' narratives further highlight that bilingual scaffolding affirms cultural identity, reduces cognitive load, and strengthens early literacy development, despite persistent shortages of bilingual resources and limited professional development. The study concludes that mother-tongue-based bilingual instruction is not a remedial strategy but a foundational approach for promoting equitable literacy and cognitive growth in multilingual contexts. Its originality lies in situating translanguaging pedagogy within rural African classrooms and illustrating how teachers operationalise bilingualism under material and ideological constraints. By offering classroom-level insights, the study contributes to national conversations about South Africa's 81% reading comprehension crisis, as

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 9 October 2025 | Revised: 6 November 2025 | Accepted: 7 November 2025 | Published Online: 4 January 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v8i1.12390

CITATION

Mulaudzi, I.C., Makhwathana, R.M., Nndwamato, N.M., 2026. Unlocking Language Potential: How Mother Tongue Shapes English Acquisition in Rural Grade 1 Classrooms of South Africa. Forum for Linguistic Studies. 8(1): 1–17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v8i1.12390

reported in PIRLS 2021. Although based on a small, context-specific sample, the findings provide transferable implications for multilingual education policy and EFAL pedagogy across rural African settings.

Keywords: Mother Tongue; English First Additional Language; Translanguaging; Phonological Transfer; Rural Literacy; Limpopo Province

1. Introduction

Language is far more than a means of communication; it is the cognitive and cultural framework through which human beings interpret the world, construct knowledge, and negotiate their identity. In education, language serves as the medium through which concepts are encoded, problem-solving is facilitated, and learners' sense of belonging is affirmed. In multilingual societies such as South Africa, the language of instruction plays a decisive role in determining learning success, especially in the foundational years of schooling when literacy skills and cognitive frameworks are most malleable. The mother tongue (L1), therefore, functions as the first intellectual scaffolding upon which new linguistic and academic competencies are built. When this foundation is weak or neglected, learners face long-term academic disadvantages that extend far beyond language classrooms [1]. In light of these contextual and theoretical considerations, the present study is both timely and necessary, as summarised below.

1.1. Global Perspective on Language and Early Literacy

Across the globe, empirical evidence consistently confirms that early instruction in the mother tongue leads to better educational outcomes. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report asserts that mother tongue-based multilingual education is a cornerstone of equitable and quality learning, particularly in linguistically diverse developing contexts [2]. Learners initially taught in their L1 demonstrate stronger comprehension of abstract concepts, more accurate decoding of print, and smoother transitions into additional languages, such as English [3]. Conversely, premature immersion in a second language (L2) before cognitive readiness often results in shallow literacy, rote learning, and persistent underachievement. Studies from Latin America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa have shown that children who struggle with early L1 instruction often struggle to master reading comprehension and content learning, even years later [1]. These patterns underscore that the language of early instruction is not merely a pedagogical detail, but a social-justice issue intimately tied to equity, inclusion, and sustainable development.

While the study focuses on South Africa's Vhembe Cluster, its insights resonate with broader global patterns of language and literacy inequality. Similar tensions between policy ideals and classroom realities are evident across Sub-Saharan systems such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, where English-dominant assessment regimes constrain multilingual pedagogy [4]. In Western contexts, comparable challenges manifest as cultural and linguistic mismatches between home and school literacies, reflecting a global struggle to balance standardisation with contextual inclusivity. Integrating comparative perspectives thus positions the South African case within a wider discourse on equity in early language learning. To enrich the theoretical framing, the introduction and literature review could incorporate emerging cross-national studies that link language, technology, and learning engagement, such as Pan and Mow on digital education research trends and Qi on the relationship between digital dependency and academic achievement [5,6]. Together, these works reinforce the need for globally responsive yet contextually grounded models of multilingual pedagogy.

1.2. South African Policy Landscape

In South Africa, the importance of linguistic equity is enshrined in the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP), which advocates additive bilingualism, the maintenance and development of learners' home languages alongside the acquisition of additional languages such as English or Afrikaans. The policy sought to rectify the historical injustices of the apartheid era, when African languages were marginalised, and English and Afrikaans were privileged as languages of power. Nevertheless, nearly three decades

later, implementation remains uneven. English continues to dominate as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 upwards, even in rural schools where learners encounter it for the first time in Grade 1. Research has shown that this abrupt linguistic transition is one of the significant structural causes of poor learning outcomes[7].

This study directly responds to South Africa's ongoing literacy crisis, as reflected in PIRLS 2021, by situating the discussion within the Klein Letaba Circuit, a microcosm of rural multilingual schooling where policy ideals often diverge from practice. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study provides sobering evidence: 81 percent of South African Grade 4 learners are unable to read for meaning in any language[8]. This statistic is not simply a reflection of weak reading pedagogy but of a systemic language-in-education crisis.

Foundational literacy, the ability to decode, comprehend, and think critically about texts, develops most effectively when early reading instruction is anchored in the learner's linguistic repertoire. Weak L1 foundations, coupled with early exposure to unfamiliar phonological and grammatical systems, generate learning gaps that widen with each grade level.

1.3. Rural Inequalities and the Klein Letaba Context

The challenges are particularly acute in rural Limpopo Province, where the present study is situated. The Klein Letaba Circuit in the Mopani East District typifies South Africa's rural linguistic ecology. Learners grow up in communities where indigenous languages, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi, dominate daily communication, while English is seldom used beyond limited exposure through media or community events. Consequently, learners arrive in Grade 1 with little familiarity with English phonology, vocabulary, or syntax. Teachers must navigate overcrowded classrooms, scarce resources, and limited professional development opportunities while helping children cross a profound linguistic divide between home and school. As Khumalo observes, mismatches between African and English phoneme inventories lead to systematic decoding errors and pronunciation difficulties that persist into upper grades.

Socio-economic factors compound the problem. Many rural schools lack libraries, print-rich environments, and bilingual reading materials[9]. Digital access is uneven, and electricity supply remains unreliable in certain villages. These structural barriers mean that children's exposure to English is primarily restricted to the classroom, placing enormous pressure on teachers to serve as both linguistic and cultural mediators.

These contextual realities justify the focus on Klein Letaba as a bounded case. The circuit typifies rural multilingual schooling in Limpopo, where resource scarcity, overcrowded classrooms, and minimal exposure to English converge to deepen inequities. Documenting teachers' adaptive strategies in this setting addresses a critical research gap in South African literacy studies and responds to calls for more context-based evidence from under-researched provinces.

1.4. Pedagogical Dilemmas and Emerging Alternatives

Traditional English-only approaches often assume that immersion accelerates language acquisition. However, evidence from South African classrooms suggests the opposite: learners who are alienated from their linguistic identities tend to disengage, resulting in low motivation and surface-level learning[10]. In response, scholars and practitioners have increasingly advocated translanguaging pedagogy, the strategic and purposeful use of multiple languages within the same lesson to facilitate meaning-making[11,12]. Translanguaging challenges the rigid separation of languages by allowing learners to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to process content. For instance, teachers might introduce new vocabulary in English, explain it in Xitsonga, and have learners summarise it bilingually. This approach affirms cultural identity, reduces cognitive load, and deepens conceptual understanding.

Empirical research across multilingual African classrooms shows that translanguaging not only supports comprehension but also fosters positive learner identity and participation[13]. In the Klein Letaba Circuit, teachers who adopt such practices report that learners grasp phonological contrasts more easily and show improved confidence when speaking English. Despite its promise, translanguaging remains largely ad hoc because of inadequate teacher preparation and a lack of policy recognition.

1.5. The Policy–Practice Paradox

The gap between the progressive intent of LiEP and classroom realities persists due to multiple factors. Teacher-education institutions still devote minimal time to applied bilingual pedagogy. Curriculum materials rarely exist in bilingual formats, and district-level monitoring of language policy implementation is inconsistent[14]. Moreover, societal attitudes that equate English fluency with intelligence or modernity often discourage the use of African languages in formal education[15]. This paradox perpetuates inequality: children whose L1 aligns with LoLT (English or Afrikaans) enjoy smoother educational pathways, while those from indigenous-language backgrounds must simultaneously learn content and the medium of its delivery.

1.6. Significance and Rationale for the Study

Against this backdrop, the present study, Unlocking Language Potential: How Mother Tongue Shapes English Acquisition in Rural Grade 1 Classrooms of South Africa, seeks to explore how teachers in the Klein Letaba Circuit perceive and manage the influence of the mother tongue on English acquisition. By foregrounding the voices of eight experienced Grade 1 teachers, the study provides empirically grounded insights into the micro-practices of language mediation in resource-constrained multilingual classrooms.

This study addresses a critical and enduring issue in South African education, the impact of the mother tongue on English acquisition among Grade 1 learners in rural settings. Its significance lies in addressing the country's persistent literacy crisis, as underscored by PIRLS 2021, which reveals that 81 percent of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. By focusing on the under-researched Klein Letaba Circuit in Limpopo Province, the study contributes rare empirical evidence from a linguistically diverse yet resource-constrained setting. It bridges theory and practice by examining how teachers enact translanguaging pedagogy to mediate English learning through learners' home languages. The research is highly relevant to the implementation of South Africa's Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) and offers actionable insights for teacher education, curriculum reform, and literacy intervention in rural schools. While its scope is limited to eight participants within one circuit, constraining broad generalisation, the study's depth and contextual richness yield meaningful implications for multilingual education policy and classroom practice across Africa.

1.7. Four Key Objectives Guide the Research

1. To investigate how the mother tongue influences phonological development in English learning.
2. To examine the effect of L1 grammatical structures on learners' English grammar.
3. To explore the role of the mother tongue in vocabulary acquisition.
4. To assess the effectiveness of translanguaging pedagogy in facilitating the transition from L1 to English.

The study's theoretical framing, drawing on Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, positions language learning as a socially mediated, cognitively interdependent process. These frameworks highlight that literacy development does not occur in isolation but through the dynamic interplay between linguistic systems, social interaction, and cultural identity.

1.8. Contribution to African Scholarship

By situating the investigation within a rural South African context, the study contributes to the growing body of African-centred scholarship on multilingual education. While international research has long validated mother tongue-based instruction, African experiences remain underrepresented in global debates[16]. This study thus extends the discourse by offering evidence from Limpopo's under-resourced classrooms, revealing how teachers innovate within systemic constraints. It aligns with the Journal of African Languages and Literary Studies' mission to advance understanding of African languages as living intellectual resources rather than relics of tradition.

"While rooted in established bilingual and sociocultural theories, this study reinterprets them through an African epistemological lens, thereby contributing to decolonial approaches in early language education."

This study distinguishes itself through its empirical and contextual depth. By focusing on the under-researched Klein Letaba Circuit in Limpopo Province, it contributes original, localised evidence to the field of multilingual education. The research documents teachers' adaptive translanguaging strate-

gies in resource-constrained rural classrooms, demonstrating how pedagogical innovation emerges despite limited materials and institutional support. Its African centred perspective advances the discourse on multilingual education by grounding global theories, such as those of Cummins, Vygotsky, García, and Wei, within the sociolinguistic realities of South Africa's rural schools. Although the study builds upon established theoretical models rather than proposing entirely new frameworks, it achieves originality through contextual application, theoretical synthesis, and policy relevance. The true value of this research, therefore, lies in its ability to transform abstract bilingual and sociocultural principles into actionable strategies for equitable, context-sensitive language education across Africa.

1.9. Structure of the Paper

Following this introduction, the article reviews relevant theoretical perspectives, describes the methodological design, presents and discusses key findings, and concludes with policy and pedagogical recommendations. Collectively, these sections demonstrate that unlocking language potential in South Africa's youngest learners requires valuing and leveraging the linguistic wealth they already possess. The argument advanced here is clear: strengthening mother tongue foundations and institutionalising translanguaging pedagogy are essential for achieving equitable literacy and cognitive development in the foundation phase.

This study directly confronts the national literacy emergency reflected in the PIRLS 2021 findings, where 81% of Grade 4 learners are unable to read for meaning in any language. By focusing on the Klein Letaba Circuit in rural Limpopo, the research situates this statistical crisis within real classrooms, illuminating how linguistic transitions between mother tongue and English shape early literacy outcomes. The investigation, therefore, bridges national policy discourse and local pedagogical realities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on the intersection of linguistic interdependence and sociocultural mediation, two perspectives that illuminate how languages interact in the developing child's mind and how social contexts shape that interaction. Understanding the relationship between the mother tongue (L1) and English (L2) in South African classrooms requires a framework that accommodates both cognitive transfer and the cultural embeddedness of learning. For this reason, the study draws primarily on Cummins' Threshold/Interdependence Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, supported by complementary insights from cross-linguistic transfer theory and translanguaging pedagogy[17,18].

This synthesis of cognitive and sociocultural perspectives informed both the design and analysis of the study. The triadic model, cognitive interdependence, sociocultural mediation, and translanguaging practice shaped the formulation of interview questions and guided the coding of data into corresponding themes. Each empirical finding later presented in the Results section directly reflects one of these three theoretical pillars.

2.1. Cummins' Threshold and Interdependence Hypothesis

Jim Cummins' pioneering work on bilingual education remains a cornerstone for understanding how first-language proficiency supports additional-language acquisition. His Threshold Hypothesis posits that learners must attain a minimum level, or "threshold", of competence in their L1 before positive transfer to an L2 can occur. Below this threshold, bilingualism may result in "limited bilingualism," where neither language develops fully. Above it, the two languages become mutually reinforcing, enhancing cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and academic achievement.

Complementing this is the Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that proficiency in one language provides a cognitive and academic foundation for learning another. Skills such as phonemic awareness, reading strategies, and conceptual knowledge are not language-specific but can be transferred across linguistic systems. For instance, a child who understands narrative sequencing or cause-and-effect relationships in Xitsonga can apply those same schemas when reading English texts. Thus, the quality of L1 instruction directly affects the rate and depth of English acquisition.

Applied to the Klein Letaba context, Cummins' theory explains why Grade 1 learners who receive structured support in their home language grasp English literacy more rapidly than peers who face abrupt English-only immersion[17]. When L1 is neglected, learners are compelled to

construct meaning in a foreign linguistic code, leading to decoding errors, slow comprehension, and disengagement from the learning process. Conversely, strong L1 instruction furnishes a reservoir of cognitive and linguistic resources, vocabulary networks, grammatical templates, and problem-solving skills that can be mobilised for English learning. Cummins further emphasises additive bilingualism, in which the L2 is added without displacing the L1, a principle echoed in South Africa's Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP)[17]. The term "limited bilingualism" has been widely debated; therefore, this study adopts the more neutral term "limited bilingualism" to describe instances where neither language develops to its full potential due to insufficient scaffolding[17].

2.2. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Where Cummins explains what transfers between languages, Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory explains how that transfer occurs through social mediation. Vygotsky views language as both a psychological tool and a social artefact, a medium through which thought is internalised and meaning is negotiated within cultural contexts[18]. Learning, in this view, occurs first on the social plane, between teacher and learner, and then on the individual plane, as the learner internalises external dialogue.

Central to this process is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance. Within the ZPD, teachers act as mediators who use linguistic scaffolds to bridge the gap between new concepts and existing knowledge. In multilingual classrooms, these scaffolds often involve the learner's home language. For example, a teacher might explain English phonemes by referencing similar sounds in Tshivenda or discuss English grammar patterns by comparing them to Sepedi constructions. Such scaffolding enables learners to grasp abstract English forms through familiar linguistic and cultural references.

Vygotsky's framework also foregrounds the cultural mediation of learning. Knowledge is not universal but shaped by the tools, signs, and practices available within a community[18]. In rural Limpopo, the mother tongue encapsulates local epistemologies, metaphors, idioms, and worldviews that give meaning to experience. When English instruction ignores these semiotic resources, learning becomes decontextualised and alienating. Using L1 as a mediational tool thus transforms the classroom into a culturally congruent space, where learners' identities are validated rather than suppressed. This aligns with the democratic vision of education espoused in South Africa's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which recognises indigenous languages as integral to cognitive development and cultural continuity[2].

2.3. Integrating the Two Perspectives

Combining Cummins and Vygotsky yields a powerful explanatory model for bilingual education. Cummins accounts for the cognitive continuity between languages, while Vygotsky elucidates the social processes through which this continuity is realised[17,18]. The mother tongue becomes both a cognitive reservoir and a social instrument of mediation. Together, these theories predict that bilingual learning flourishes when teachers intentionally use L1 to scaffold L2 instruction within the learner's ZPD, precisely the pedagogical logic of translanguaging.

In practice, this synthesis suggests that the effectiveness of English teaching in Grade 1 depends less on the quantity of exposure than on the quality of mediation linking the two languages. A teacher who merely switches to English immersion without scaffolding deprives learners of the conceptual bridge needed for comprehension. By contrast, a teacher who deliberately aligns phonological patterns, grammatical structures, and semantic fields across languages helps learners perceive English not as alien but as an extension of their existing cognitive repertoire.

2.4. Cross-Linguistic Transfer and Contrastive Analysis

A further refinement arises from cross-linguistic transfer theory, which examines how features of one language influence the acquisition of another[19]. Transfer may be positive, where similarities facilitate learning (e.g., shared subject-verb-object order), or negative, where differences cause interference (e.g., omission of English articles by speakers of agglutinative African languages). In the present study, such transfers are evident in learners' phonological substitutions, grammatical simplifications, and literal translations.

Integrating this perspective with Cummins' model clar-

ifies that transfer is not random but cognitively patterned. Learners draw on L1 knowledge to make hypotheses about L2 structure. When instruction explicitly contrasts these structures, through contrastive grammar or comparative phonics, teachers convert potential interference into metalinguistic awareness. This insight underpins the translanguaging strategies observed in Klein Letaba classrooms, where teachers juxtapose L1 and English forms to highlight differences and promote reflection.

2.5. Translanguaging as Applied Theory

Recent scholarship by García and Wei reframes bilingualism not as two separate linguistic systems but as an integrated repertoire from which speakers select features to make meaning[20]. Translanguaging, therefore, moves beyond code-switching: it legitimises the fluid interplay of languages within a single communicative act. Theoretically, it operationalises both Cummins' and Vygotsky's ideas, namely the cognitive interdependence of languages and the social mediation of meaning, within classroom practice[17,18].

In the Klein Letaba context, translanguaging manifests when teachers introduce English vocabulary through local stories, allow learners to discuss ideas in their mother tongue, and then guide them to express those ideas in English. This cyclical movement between languages mirrors the ZPD's scaffolding process and Cummins' threshold model of second language acquisition[17]. It transforms multilingualism from a problem to be managed into a pedagogy of empowerment.

However, the success of translanguaging depends on institutional recognition and teacher competence. Without explicit training, teachers risk using it haphazardly, diluting rather than strengthening linguistic connections. The theoretical framework thus underscores the need for systemic professional development that grounds translanguaging in sound psycholinguistic and sociocultural principles.

2.6. Conceptual Framework for the Study

Drawing these theoretical strands together, the study conceptualises Grade 1 English acquisition as a dynamic system shaped by three interrelated dimensions:

1. Cognitive Interdependence: Foundational literacy skills and conceptual knowledge established in L1 underpin L2 learning[17].
2. Sociocultural Mediation: Teacher-learner interactions, cultural tools, and classroom discourse determine how effectively L1 resources are mobilised[18].
3. Translanguaging Practice: The deliberate pedagogical activation of the learner's full linguistic repertoire serves as the operational bridge between the two theories.

This triadic model guides both the data-collection instruments and the analysis. Interview questions are designed to probe teachers' understandings of cognitive transfer (e.g., "How do you connect learners' home-language knowledge to English phonics?"), their mediational strategies (e.g., "How do you use learners' languages to explain new concepts?"), and their translanguaging practices. The resulting framework positions the mother tongue not as peripheral but as the central conduit through which English literacy is constructed. This triadic model not only integrates established theories but also extends them by grounding cognitive and sociocultural interdependence in African multilingual epistemologies. It foregrounds the learner's linguistic ecology as a source of meaning-making and positions translanguaging as a decolonial classroom practice.

2.7. Relevance to African Multilingual Contexts

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, linguistic diversity coexists with the dominance of colonial languages in schooling. The combined framework employed here challenges that hierarchy by situating African languages as legitimate vehicles of cognition. It resonates with Stroud and Kerfoot's call for epistemic multilingualism, an educational philosophy recognising that knowledge production can and should occur in indigenous languages[21]. Within this paradigm, the mother tongue is both a right and a resource, and translanguaging becomes a practical embodiment of decolonial pedagogy.

2.8. Synthesis

In summary, the theoretical framework contends that effective English acquisition among Grade 1 learners in rural South Africa emerges from the interaction of three forces:

1. The cognitive continuity linking L1 and L2[17],
2. The social mediation of learning through culturally

responsive scaffolding[18], and

3. The pedagogical enactment of these principles through translanguaging.

This synthesis provides the intellectual lens through which the study's methodology is designed, data interpreted, and findings discussed. It also establishes a compelling argument for re-imagining bilingual education in South Africa, not as a transitional phase toward English monolingualism, but as a sustainable model of multilingual competence that values every learner's linguistic heritage.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm and Rationale

This study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding over measurement and aims to capture the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences[22]. In multilingual classrooms, the acquisition of English cannot be fully understood through test scores alone; instead, it requires listening to teachers' nuanced reflections on how learners navigate linguistic transitions between their mother tongue and English. The interpretivist lens, therefore, provides a philosophical foundation for exploring subjective realities and the contextual complexities that shape pedagogical practice in rural South Africa.

The paradigm recognises that knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent. In the Klein Letaba Circuit, classroom interactions are influenced by multiple sociolinguistic variables, including teacher beliefs, learners' language repertoires, cultural norms, and resource limitations. By privileging participants' voices, the researcher sought to construct an authentic, multi-layered picture of how mother-tongue influence manifests in early English learning. This stance aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the mediational role of social interaction in learning, and with Cummins' notion that linguistic competence develops through interdependence rather than isolation[17,18].

3.2. Research Design

A qualitative case-study design was employed to facilitate an in-depth investigation of Grade 1 English instruction within the Klein Letaba Circuit, acknowledging the uniqueness of the context[23]. The design is exploratory and descriptive, exploratory because limited research exists on translanguaging in Limpopo's foundation phase, and descriptive because the intention is to document actual classroom experiences rather than impose external variables. The researcher functioned as an empathetic interpreter seeking meaning within naturalistic settings.

3.3. Research Setting

The study was conducted in the Klein Letaba Circuit of the Mopani East District in Limpopo Province. The circuit comprises several rural public primary schools serving multilingual communities where Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi are the predominant languages. Schools are under-resourced, with large class sizes and limited bilingual materials. English serves as a subject from Grade 1 and as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4. This environment typifies the linguistic and infrastructural realities of rural South African education, offering fertile ground for examining the influence of the mother tongue on English acquisition.

3.4. Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of all Grade 1 teachers in public schools within the Klein Letaba Circuit. Purposive sampling was employed to select eight teachers with relevant experience and insight[24]. Selection criteria included a minimum of three years' experience in multilingual classrooms and direct involvement in teaching English FAL. The sample achieved thematic saturation after the eighth interview, aligning with Guest, Namey, and Chen's guideline that saturation typically occurs within six to twelve interviews in homogeneous qualitative samples[25]. Participants represented both deep-rural and peri-urban schools, offering variation in resource levels and language profiles.

3.5. Data-Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting 45–60 minutes each. The interview guide was organised around four thematic clusters aligned with the research objectives: phonological development, grammatical transfer, vocabulary acquisition, and translan-

guaging pedagogy. Open-ended questions invited reflective narratives, while follow-up prompts elicited concrete examples. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, though participants could revert to their L1 for clarity. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent, and field notes captured contextual observations.

Although interviews served as the primary data source, methodological triangulation was supported through member checking and reflective field notes. Future research could include classroom observations to complement self-reported data.

3.6. Data Preparation, Analysis, and Management

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised using pseudonyms for teachers and schools. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts while listening to recordings to internalise tone and nuance. Using NVivo 12 Plus, segments of text were coded inductively and then clustered into four core themes aligned with the research questions: phonological transfer, grammatical interference, lexical development, and translanguaging pedagogy. The analysis adapted Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic approach, but emphasised identifying cognitive, sociocultural, and pedagogical patterns that reflected the study's theoretical framework [26]. Coding reliability was confirmed through peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers, yielding 92% agreement across themes.

3.7. Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

The researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the study, documenting analytic decisions and potential biases. Methodological rigour was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of an audit trail of coding iterations. Credibility and confirmability were strengthened by grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim quotations, while detailed contextual description enhanced transferability to comparable rural multilingual settings.

3.8. Researcher Positionality

Given the researcher's professional experience as a language-education specialist at the University of Venda, reflexivity is integral. A reflective journal documented assumptions, emotional reactions, and interpretive choices throughout the research cycle. This practice ensures transparency and helps bracket personal biases about the superiority of any language or method. Periodic peer debriefing sessions with two colleagues, who are versed in qualitative linguistics, provided critical feedback on coding reliability and thematic saturation.

3.9. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure methodological integrity, the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (2020) were systematically applied. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement, triangulation across eight teachers, and member checking. Dependability was established via a detailed audit trail of methodological decisions. Confirmability was maintained through the use of verbatim quotations, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling, while transferability was supported by rich contextual descriptions of the Klein Letaba setting, which allowed for comparison with similar multilingual contexts.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee (Reference No. SHSSE 24/EMS/02/1104). Authorisation to access participating schools was granted by the Limpopo Department of Basic Education, and written informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and participation remained voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. All data and supporting documentation, including parental consent forms, teacher consent forms, and institutional approvals, were securely archived in accordance with university policy and are available for audit upon reasonable request by the journal or authorised research ethics bodies.

3.11. Limitations of the Methodology

While the qualitative design yielded deep insights into teachers' perceptions, its reliance on self-reported narratives limited the capture of authentic classroom dynamics. The focus on a single circuit further limited the generalisability of the findings, rendering the conclusions context-specific

rather than nationally representative. Nevertheless, this contextual depth aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which values meaning-making within lived experience over statistical universality. The exclusive use of semi-structured interviews, although limiting the observation of spontaneous translanguaging, was a deliberate methodological choice that enabled a nuanced exploration of teachers' cognitive and pedagogical reasoning. Methodological rigour was ensured through member checking, data saturation, and reflexivity to maintain credibility and trustworthiness. Future research could strengthen methodological triangulation by incorporating classroom observations, learner artefacts, or document analysis to complement interview data. Such approaches would capture the dynamic enactment of bilingual pedagogy in situ, enhancing the ecological validity, richness, and transferability of findings across comparable multilingual contexts.

4. Findings and Discussion

To maintain analytic clarity, this section distinguishes between participants' voices and theoretical interpretation. Each theme begins with a short subheading and a selection of verbatim excerpts that foreground teachers' experiences. The excerpts are followed by interpretive commentary and literature integration, tracing the analytic progression from classroom realities to conceptual insights. This structure ensures that participants' perspectives remain central while theoretical reflection deepens, rather than obscures, the meaning of their narratives.

4.1. Phonological Transfer and Decoding Barriers

This theme examined how learners' first-language (L1) sound systems impact their English decoding abilities and how teachers adjust their strategies to address phonological transfer. Teachers reported that Grade 1 learners often struggled to recognise and produce unfamiliar English sounds. Learners whose home languages were Xitsonga, Tshivenda, or Sepedi typically confused minimal pairs, such as /iː/ and /ɪ/ or /æ/ and /e/, resulting in substitutions like "ship" and "sheep" or "ben" and "ban". Consonant clusters common in English (e.g., /bl/, /str/, /ŋθ/) were often simplified through epenthesis ("bulo" for "blue") or deletion ("ca" for "cat").

> *"They find it difficult to hear the difference; sometimes 'pen' and 'pain' sound the same to them,"* explained Teacher T2.
>
> *"I start by showing how the mouth moves for the English sound, then let them try in Xitsonga,"* added Teacher T3.

These accounts illustrate the predictable influence of L1 phonological patterns on English decoding, consistent with research on multilingual transfer[3,9,17,19]. Rather than reflecting cognitive deficit, such interference demonstrates incomplete cross-language mapping at the phonological level. Learners possessed awareness of sound–symbol relationships in their L1 but needed to recalibrate these within the English phoneme inventory. Teachers who acknowledged this interdependence and explicitly compared sound systems enhanced learner engagement and comprehension. This adaptive practice embodies the mediational principles emphasised in sociocultural theory[18] and the cognitive-transfer mechanisms highlighted by Ortiz et al.[17]. As Teacher T3's approach shows, translanguaging phonics served as a cognitive bridge between languages, reinforcing both confidence and conceptual clarity.

Despite these innovations, participants lamented the shortage of bilingual phonics resources in African languages, reflecting broader policy–practice gaps noted in national reviews[14]. Without standardised bilingual readers or alphabet charts, teachers relied on improvised materials. This scarcity highlights structural inequities within the education system, where policy promotes additive bilingualism but inadequate resource allocation persists[1,2,14]. Consequently, pedagogical innovation must be complemented by systemic support to ensure the sustainable transfer of literacy.

4.2. Grammatical Interference and Syntactic Negotiation

This theme examined how learners' first-language (L1) grammatical structures influenced their development of English syntax and how teachers mediated these differences through reflective comparison. Teachers observed that learners often omitted auxiliaries ("*She is going to school*"), misused determiners ("*I have a book*"), or misordered words ("*Book I want*"), patterns rooted in the structural contrasts between agglutinative Bantu languages and analytic English.

In Tshivenda, for instance, tense and aspect are encoded through verb morphology rather than auxiliary verbs, leading learners to initially treat English auxiliaries as redundant.

> *"When they speak, they forget the small helping words. They think 'is' or 'are' are not important,"* explained Teacher T5.
>
> *"I write both sentences on the board, Sepedi and English, so they see what is missing,"* added Teacher T6.

These accounts illustrate grammatical interference as part of learners' evolving interlanguage, consistent with cross-linguistic transfer research [3,17,19]. Such errors reflect active rule-testing rather than deficiency. Teachers who adopted contrastive methods, visually comparing sentence patterns, facilitated metalinguistic awareness. This aligns with the interdependence hypothesis [17] and sociocultural mediation [18], both of which emphasise guided support within the learner's developmental zone.

By contextualising grammar lessons within familiar linguistic patterns, teachers transformed error correction into dialogic discovery. Learners gradually internalised English sentence structure while maintaining pride in their home languages. These findings affirm research emphasising multilingual pedagogy as a resource for structural insight and confidence-building [1,11,20].

4.3. Lexical Development and Conceptual Transfer

This theme explored how teachers perceived and addressed learners' limited English vocabulary and how conceptual knowledge from the mother tongue (L1) facilitated meaning-making in English. Teachers reported that Grade 1 learners entered school with a limited English lexicon, largely restricted to everyday nouns such as "*book*," "*pen*," and "*teacher*." Exposure to English outside school was minimal, as few households owned storybooks or had access to digital media. Consequently, learners relied heavily on literal translation from their L1, producing expressions such as *heavy rain* for *heavy rain* or *I am doing homework* for *I am writing homework*.

> *"They know what they want to say, but they look for English words that don't exist in their language,"* explained Teacher T4.
>
> *"When we talk about farming or rivers, they have ideas, but the English words are missing,"* added Teacher T1.

These experiences illustrate the interdependence of lexical and conceptual development. Learners possessed the underlying concepts but struggled to map them onto English vocabulary, confirming Cummins' view *of the common underlying proficiency principle, which states* that conceptual knowledge transfers across languages even when linguistic labels differ [17]. Teachers who built upon learners' L1 experiences through contextualised bilingual activities, such as picture-talks, dual-language word walls, and story retellings, enhanced semantic retention and comprehension. By first eliciting familiar terms in Xitsonga or Tshivenda and then introducing English equivalents, teachers activated existing schema, enabling meaningful rather than rote vocabulary learning [1,4,11,18].

This approach aligns with sociocultural perspectives emphasising that knowledge is constructed through interaction within meaningful contexts [2]. Bilingual word-building tasks and narrative exercises thus functioned as mediational tools linking local experience to English expression. However, teachers acknowledged persistent challenges in teaching culturally distant words, such as "*snow*" or "*skyscraper*," which lacked immediate referents in the learners' environments. Such lexical gaps highlight the disjuncture between global curricula and local realities, underscoring the need for curriculum localisation and resource adaptation [2,14]. Overall, the findings demonstrate that leveraging L1 conceptual frameworks not only accelerates English vocabulary acquisition but also affirms learners' cultural identities, thereby fostering engagement and cognitive depth in bilingual classrooms. The next theme examines translanguaging as a mediational pedagogy emerging from these multilingual practices.

4.4. Translanguaging as a Mediational Pedagogy

This theme examined how teachers strategically used learners' home languages to mediate understanding, participation, and identity in multilingual classrooms. Translanguaging, as described by García and Wei (2020), refers to the deliberate and dynamic use of multiple languages in the process of meaning-making. For the participants, translan-

guaging was not simply spontaneous code-switching but a purposeful pedagogical choice that bridged linguistic gaps, fostered cognitive engagement, and validated learners' cultural identities.

4.4.1. Translanguaging as a Tool for Comprehension

All eight teachers reported using translanguaging to simplify explanations, introduce new concepts, and maintain learner engagement. They described instances where translating key ideas into the learners' mother tongue enabled them to grasp meanings that would otherwise be lost in English-only instruction.

> *"If I block their language, I block their thinking,"* stated Teacher T8.
>
> *"When I first explain in Xitsonga, they understand the topic; then I continue in English, and they follow easily,"* noted Teacher T3.

These accounts demonstrate that translanguaging functioned as an essential mediational scaffold within the learners' Zone of Proximal Development[18]. By moving fluidly between English and the mother tongue, teachers reduced cognitive load and enhanced conceptual clarity. Learners who could discuss ideas in familiar linguistic frames participated more actively and developed confidence in expressing themselves. This pattern supports the argument that multilingual mediation enhances comprehension and long-term retention, particularly among early learners navigating multiple language systems[1,4,11,20].

4.4.2. Translanguaging for Cognitive and Affective Development

Teachers also emphasised the emotional and motivational benefits of translanguaging. Allowing learners to use their home languages created a safe classroom space where mistakes were tolerated and curiosity was encouraged.

> *"When I let them answer in Sepedi first, they become excited and confident to try in English,"* explained Teacher T5.

Such experiences reflect the affective dimension of translanguaging, which aligns with sociocultural learning theory, where emotion, identity, and cognition are interlinked[18]. Through bilingual dialogue, learners constructed understanding collaboratively, while teachers facilitated meaning-making rather than dictating it. Translanguaging also allowed teachers to assess comprehension more authentically: by listening to learners' L1 responses, teachers could evaluate conceptual grasp before transitioning to English articulation[1,11,13]. This iterative process transformed classrooms into dialogic learning spaces rather than hierarchically controlled environments.

4.4.3. Translanguaging as an Inclusive and Decolonial Practice

Beyond its instructional value, translanguaging served as a sociopolitical act of inclusion and linguistic justice. Teachers recognised that privileging English alone perpetuated colonial hierarchies that marginalised African languages. By integrating Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi alongside English, they affirmed learners' cultural identities and challenged the notion that African languages are barriers to academic success.

> *"When we mix the languages, they see that their language is also powerful,"* remarked Teacher T2.

This approach aligns with Lachini and García, as well as Stroud & Kerfoot's advocacy for translanguaging as a decolonial pedagogical strategy that resists linguistic subordination. It positions learners as legitimate bilinguals rather than deficient second-language speakers. Teachers' practices thus reflect emerging African scholarship that views multilingualism as a cognitive and cultural asset rather than a limitation[14].

However, participants acknowledged tensions between classroom realities and institutional expectations. Some feared that extensive L1 use might be misinterpreted by supervisors as poor English teaching. Others lamented the absence of training or official guidelines to structure translanguaging practices systematically. These constraints underscore the need for explicit policy support and professional development to normalise multilingual pedagogy within South African schools.

4.5. Synthesis of Findings with Theoretical Framework

The four themes collectively affirm the interdependence-mediation synthesis underpinning the study. Learners' difficul-

ties with phonology, grammar, and vocabulary arise not from linguistic deficiency but from the absence of scaffolds that connect L1 and L2. When teachers employ translanguaging, they activate the very mechanisms described by Cummins and Vygotsky (**Table 1**):

This triangulation reveals that the effectiveness of English teaching in rural South Africa hinges less on the volume of exposure than on the *quality of cross-language mediation*. Teachers who treat the mother tongue as a bridge achieve better literacy outcomes and foster positive learner identity. Those constrained by monolingual ideologies perpetuate barriers to understanding and confidence.

Table 1. Theoretical–Empirical Synthesis of Findings.

Framework Element	Empirical Manifestation	Interpretation of Findings
Cognitive Interdependence [17]	Learners' first language (L1) knowledge and literacy skills facilitate the acquisition of English.	Mother tongue proficiency predicts English phonological, grammatical, and lexical development, confirming cross-linguistic transfer and additive bilingualism.
Sociocultural Mediation [18]	Teachers employ L1 scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through guided explanations, comparisons, and dialogues.	Learning is co-constructed through social interaction, cultural tools, and contextually meaningful discourse, reflecting the mediational function of language.
Translanguaging [20]	Planned bilingual cycles—previewing in L1, teaching in English, reviewing bilingually—are used to promote comprehension and participation.	Multilingual repertoires enhance conceptual understanding, learner confidence, and identity affirmation; languages function as pedagogical resources rather than deficits.

Source: Author's analysis (2025).

4.6. Implications for Early Language Acquisition

The data underscore several implications for theory and practice:

- Phonological awareness must be taught contrastively. Integrating L1 phonics before English reduces decoding errors [9,17,19].
- Grammar instruction should capitalise on L1 similarities and differences, utilising bilingual charts to make invisible patterns visible [3,17].
- Vocabulary enrichment requires contextual, culture-based content that links words to learners' lived experiences [1,11,16].
- Translanguaging pedagogy should be formally institutionalised in teacher-education curricula to move from individual improvisation to systemic best practice [14,20,21].
- Policy reinforcement must address not only linguistic rights but also provide material support, develop bilingual resources, and train mentors for rural teachers [2,14].

Collectively, these findings validate the study's central proposition: that mother tongue-based bilingual instruction is not a remedial accommodation but an essential pathway toward equitable literacy and cognitive development. By harnessing rather than suppressing linguistic diversity, educators in rural South Africa can transform classrooms from sites of linguistic struggle into spaces of intellectual empowerment.

5. Policy and Practice Implications

5.1. Strengthening Theoretical Alignment

The study's integration of Cummins' and Vygotsky's frameworks provides a theoretical rationale for reinforcing the implementation of bilingual policies [17,18]. Cognitive interdependence underscores the need for systematic support in transferring literacy from the mother tongue to English, while sociocultural mediation highlights the importance of teacher agency in designing linguistically responsive classrooms. Translanguaging thus serves as a practical bridge between theory and policy [1,4,11,20].

South Africa's linguistic landscape presents both a profound opportunity and a structural challenge for educational equity. Although the Language-in-Education Policy advocates *additive bilingualism*, implementation remains fragmented, particularly in rural provinces such as Limpopo [14]. The findings underscore the pressing need for greater alignment between language policy intentions and classroom realities. Translanguaging, bilingual resource development, and teacher-education reform must move from the margins of pedagogical innovation to the centre of state-endorsed practice [1,2,21].

5.2. Strengthening Policy Implementation and Accountability

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) should reinforce LiEP through concrete accountability mechanisms. School governing bodies and circuit managers require training to effectively interpret and implement bilingual provisions. Currently, policy monitoring focuses primarily on compliance paperwork rather than classroom processes[14]. District-level audits should therefore include lesson observations and evidence of bilingual resource use. Incentivising schools that demonstrate effective mother-tongue-based pedagogy, through recognition, awards, or funding, would signal an institutional commitment to linguistic inclusion.

Moreover, language-policy implementation plans must be integrated into School Improvement Programmes (SIPs) and Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs). Without explicit planning, teachers revert to English-only instruction under pressure to meet assessment benchmarks. Embedding bilingual targets within performance appraisal systems can normalise the practice. The DBE's 2023 progress review already identifies "uneven linguistic transition support" as a national bottleneck; thus, a framework linking LiEP compliance to literacy outcomes is both feasible and timely[14].

5.3. Teacher Professional Development

Teachers remain the linchpin of effective bilingual education. The study reveals that Grade 1 teachers often deploy translanguaging instinctively yet lack formal training in its theoretical foundations or structured application[17,18]. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and universities should integrate *Applied Bilingual Pedagogy* modules within pre-service programmes, emphasising comparative phonology, cross-linguistic transfer, and classroom translanguaging cycles.

For in-service educators, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) must evolve beyond brief workshops. Long-term mentoring and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can provide platforms for sharing bilingual teaching materials and reflective practice. Research evidence indicates that when teachers collaborate on developing bilingual lesson plans, both teacher confidence and learner outcomes improve[1,11,20,25]. The South African Council for Educators (SACE) could accredit such CPD activities, ensuring national consistency and quality.

5.4. Resource Development and Curriculum Localisation

One of the most consistent concerns among teachers is the lack of bilingual readers and phonics materials. Rural schools rely heavily on ad-hoc translations that lack grammatical accuracy or cultural relevance[2,8,14]. To address this gap, the DBE should partner with provincial language units, NGOs, and community publishers to produce cost-effective, context-sensitive bilingual resources in Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi.

Curriculum localisation is equally vital. Many Grade 1 textbooks depict urban or foreign experiences, such as snow, elevators, or supermarkets, which can alienate rural learners. Localised content reflecting Limpopo's environment (farming, rivers, communal life) enhances semantic relevance and conceptual transfer[1,16]. Such reform aligns with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which advocates for culturally responsive curricula as drivers of inclusion and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2023).

Digital adaptation must accompany print innovation. Low-bandwidth mobile applications offering bilingual storybooks and phonics games can extend literacy exposure beyond school hours. Partnerships with telecommunication companies could mirror successful initiatives such as Vodacom e-School[5,6].

5.5. Sociolinguistic Transformation and Public Attitudes

The study reveals a lingering stigma against African languages in education, a colonial residue that equates English fluency with intelligence or prestige[15,21]. Policy enforcement alone cannot dismantle such ideologies; public awareness campaigns are essential. The DBE, in collaboration with the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), should spearhead campaigns celebrating multilingual success stories, demonstrating that proficiency in one's mother tongue, combined with English, yields superior cognitive outcomes[1,17].

Community engagement is critical. Parents often pressure teachers to use English exclusively, fearing that instruction in their mother tongue will disadvantage their children.

Awareness dialogues, parent-teacher workshops, and radio discussions in local languages can help dispel misconceptions by sharing empirical evidence of the benefits of additive bilingualism [2,11].

5.6. Research and Data-Driven Policy

Sustained policy evolution demands longitudinal evidence. Current data on the effectiveness of bilingual education remain scattered across small-scale studies. The National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) should commission multi-year research tracking learners taught through mother tongue-based bilingual models from Grades 1–6. Such evidence will inform the national literacy strategy and justify budget allocations [14,23]. Collaboration between universities, provincial departments, and teacher-training colleges can establish rural language-education research hubs, positioning South Africa as a continental leader in multilingual scholarship.

In summary, the findings call for a systemic paradigm shift: from treating African languages as transitional tools to recognising them as durable vehicles of knowledge. Translanguaging must evolve from an informal classroom survival tactic into an institutionalised, policy-backed pedagogy that underpins equitable literacy for all [1,4,11,25].

Although the study is context-specific and based on eight teachers within one circuit, its purpose was not statistical generalisation but theoretical and contextual transferability. The findings may inform similar multilingual settings across rural Africa, offering a grounded framework for adapting translanguaging pedagogy under constrained conditions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined how the mother tongue shapes English acquisition among Grade 1 learners in rural Limpopo. By aligning Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research offers a theoretically integrated perspective on language learning as both a cognitive and social process [17,18]. Findings demonstrate that learners' linguistic repertoires, when supported through structured translanguaging, enhance comprehension, confidence, and a sense of identity affirmation [1,4,11,20].

This study aims to investigate the impact of the mother tongue on the acquisition of English by Grade 1 learners in rural Limpopo. Through the voices of eight teachers, it uncovered the complex interplay between linguistic transfer, sociocultural context, and pedagogical agency. The findings demonstrate unequivocally that the mother tongue is not a hindrance but a cognitive and cultural bridge to English proficiency [3,17,19]. Phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterns transferred from L1 to L2 reveal learners' resourcefulness in navigating linguistic boundaries. When teachers harness these patterns through translanguaging, comprehension deepens, and learner confidence flourishes.

Theoretically, the study confirms Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, demonstrating that L1 competence underpins L2 literacy, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which illustrates that learning unfolds through mediated social interaction [17,18]. Empirically, it showcases the adaptability of rural teachers who, despite limited resources, employ creative bilingual strategies to make learning meaningful. However, structural barriers, insufficient materials, inconsistent policy support, and societal bias toward English continue to hinder the full realisation of multilingual education envisioned by LiEP [1,2,14,21].

Ultimately, equitable literacy in South Africa's foundation phase will remain elusive unless systemic reforms position the mother tongue at the core of teaching and learning. Strengthening bilingual education is therefore not merely a linguistic adjustment but a moral imperative linked to social justice, cognitive empowerment, and the decolonisation of schooling [1,15,21].

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are advanced for policymakers, educators, and researchers:

Institutionalise Translanguaging Pedagogy

Integrate translanguaging guidelines into the CAPS documents and district-level teaching frameworks to support effective language use and learning [1,4,11,20].

Provide exemplar lesson plans demonstrating structured bilingual cycles (preview–teach–review).

Revitalise Teacher-Education Programmes

Universities and TVET colleges should introduce compulsory modules on bilingual and multilingual pedagogy [17,18].

Strengthen practicum supervision in multilingual settings to model translanguaging strategies.

Develop and Distribute Bilingual Resources

Commission local writers and illustrators to produce culturally relevant dual-language readers for Grade R–3 [2,8,14,16].

Translate key phonics and grammar charts into Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi while preserving linguistic accuracy.

Enhance Policy Monitoring and Incentivisation

Require schools to submit annual LiEP implementation reports, including examples of bilingual teaching artefacts [14].

Reward exemplary bilingual schools with recognition grants or teacher-excellence awards.

Foster Community and Parental Engagement

Launch advocacy campaigns that highlight evidence of improved literacy through mother tongue instruction [1,2,17].

Involve parents in developing local language glossaries and storytelling activities.

Invest in Ongoing Research and Innovation

Establish a National Multilingual Education Observatory to monitor trends and disseminate best practices.

Fund pilot projects comparing literacy trajectories under English-only versus bilingual instruction models.

Promote Linguistic Equity as a Human-Rights Agenda

Recognise language inclusion as integral to the constitutional right to education.

Embed linguistic justice indicators within the National Development Plan 2030 performance metrics [1,15,21].

By embracing these recommendations, South Africa can transform the foundation-phase classroom into a multilingual space of opportunity, rather than one of exclusion. Learners who build literacy first in their mother tongue will not only master English more effectively but also preserve the linguistic heritage that anchors their identity and thought. In doing so, the education system can fulfill its constitutional promise of equity, excellence, and dignity for all learners.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation, I.C.M.; methodology, I.C.M.; formal analysis, I.C.M.; investigation, I.C.M., R.M.M., and N.M.N.; resources, N.M.N.; data curation, I.C.M.; writing the original draft preparation, I.C.M.; writing: review and editing, R.M.M. and N.M.N.; visualisation, I.C.M.; supervision, R.M.M.; project administration, N.M.N.; page fee funding acquisition, I.C.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

The University of Venda, through its Research and Postgraduate Studies section, funds the page fee.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with and approval of the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee (SHSSE 24/EMS/02/1104).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all the subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

All data utilised in this research are available upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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