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Sesotho Morphology as a Pedagogical Translanguaging Resource for Developing Metalinguistic Awareness in South African TVET Classrooms[4]

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Abstract

The continued dominance of English in South African technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions has limited the pedagogical use of Indigenous African languages despite national commitments to multilingualism and linguistic equity. This paper examines how Sesotho morphology can function as a pedagogical translanguaging resource for developing metalinguistic awareness among multilingual TVET students. Drawing on critical language theory and translanguaging scholarship, the paper adopts a qualitative participatory action research design involving 16 Sesotho-speaking students and four lecturers from a multilingual TVET college. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, and were analysed thematically. The findings reveal that Sesotho morphological structures, including noun class systems, concordial agreement, and affixation, facilitate cross-linguistic transfer, strengthen conceptual understanding, and enhance learners' metalinguistic awareness by enabling them to compare and manipulate linguistic forms across Sesotho and English. Participants further reported that translanguaging practices improved comprehension, learner participation, and linguistic identity affirmation, although institutional reliance on English for teaching and assessment constrained the systematic use of Sesotho as a pedagogical resource. The study argues that Sesotho morphology constitutes an important cognitive and epistemic resource that can support multilingual learning and challenge monolingual ideologies in vocational education. It concludes that integrating Indigenous language morphology into translanguaging pedagogies can contribute to more inclusive, linguistically responsive, and decolonial approaches to teaching and learning in South African TVET institutions.

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Background and Introduction

Language plays a central role in shaping cognition, identity, and access to education in multilingual societies. In the context of South Africa, the recognition of Indigenous African languages in education has increasingly become a matter of epistemic justice and linguistic transformation. Despite the constitutional recognition of 12 official languages and numerous policy reforms aimed at promoting multilingualism, English continues to dominate teaching and learning spaces, particularly within technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges (Makalela, 2022; Mkhize & Balfour, 2023). Consequently, African languages such as Sesotho remain marginalised in pedagogical practice, even though they possess sophisticated linguistic systems capable of supporting cognitive development and academic literacy.

Among the linguistic components of Sesotho, morphology constitutes one of the most intricate and pedagogically significant systems. Morphology refers to the study of word formation and the meaningful arrangement of morphemes within a language (Mercado, 2025). In Sesotho, morphemes function cohesively through noun class systems, concordial agreement, affixation, and derivational structures to generate complex meanings and grammatical relations (Mojela, 2021). Importantly, these morphological structures not only facilitate communication but also enable speakers to construct social and cultural meaning within multilingual contexts. However, notwithstanding the linguistic richness of Sesotho morphology, its educational value in TVET institutions remains underutilised and underexplored (Çöltekin & Rama, 2022). As a result, many multilingual learners are deprived of opportunities to draw on their Indigenous linguistic repertoires as cognitive and pedagogical resources.

Furthermore, the persistent dominance of English within TVET education has contributed to the erosion of metalinguistic awareness among Sesotho-speaking students (Hennessy & Apel, 2017). Metalinguistic awareness refers to the ability to consciously reflect on and manipulate linguistic forms and structures to enhance comprehension and learning (Cummins, 2021). In multilingual classrooms, this awareness becomes essential because students frequently navigate between languages to negotiate meaning. Nevertheless, institutional practices often privilege monolingual pedagogies that discourage translanguaging and the integration of African linguistic resources into formal teaching and learning processes (Probyn, 2020). Consequently, students' linguistic identities are frequently fragmented, leading to reduced participation, limited conceptual understanding, and weakened academic confidence.

In contrast, contemporary educational approaches increasingly advocate for multilingual pedagogies that affirm learners' linguistic and cultural identities. Translanguaging, in particular, has emerged as a transformative pedagogical approach that recognises multilingual speakers' fluid use of multiple linguistic systems to construct meaning and facilitate learning (García & Wei, 2021). Within the South African educational landscape, translanguaging has increasingly been viewed as a mechanism for validating African languages as legitimate educational resources (Makalela, 2022). Therefore, integrating Sesotho morphology into multilingual classrooms can potentially strengthen conceptual understanding, encourage linguistic inclusivity, and enhance learner participation within TVET education.

Moreover, Sesotho morphemes possess considerable potential to facilitate cross-linguistic transfer in multilingual settings. Cross-linguistic transfer occurs when linguistic knowledge acquired in one language supports comprehension and meaning-making in another language (Cummins, 2021). For example, the noun class system and morphological transparency in Sesotho can assist learners in understanding grammatical relationships, vocabulary formation, and semantic structures in English as a First Additional Language. Similarly, hybrid linguistic constructions that blend Sesotho morphemes with English lexical stems demonstrate how multilingual students creatively negotiate meaning across languages (Khodadoust et al., 2013). Such practices affirm that African languages are not barriers to learning but rather, valuable cognitive resources capable of enhancing academic engagement and literacy development.

Additionally, the marginalisation of Sesotho morphology within TVET institutions reflects broader sociohistorical inequalities embedded within the South African education system. Historically, colonial and apartheid language policies positioned Indigenous African languages as inferior to English and Afrikaans, thereby restricting their development in formal educational domains (Heugh, 2021). Although democratic reforms sought to redress these inequalities, implementation challenges continue to hinder the meaningful integration of African languages into higher and vocational education. Consequently, many students encounter linguistic exclusion despite learning in multilingual environments. This disjuncture highlights the urgent need for pedagogical approaches that recognise students' lived linguistic realities and leverage Indigenous linguistic knowledge systems in education.

Against that backdrop, this paper examines how the use of Sesotho morphemes in multilingual spaces enables translanguaging and affirms African linguistic resources within TVET education. Specifically, the paper explores how Sesotho morphology can function as a pedagogical resource in multilingual classrooms to enhance linguistic identity, cognitive engagement, and conceptual understanding among students. Ultimately, the paper argues that Sesotho morphology extends beyond grammatical functionality to serve as a transformative educational resource that promotes translanguaging, strengthens linguistic identity, and enhances conceptual learning among multilingual students. By foregrounding Sesotho morphemes within TVET classrooms, the paper seeks to challenge deficit perceptions surrounding African languages and advocate for more inclusive and linguistically responsive educational practices.

Research Question, Aim, and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how Sesotho morphology functions as a pedagogical translanguaging resource for developing metalinguistic awareness and enhancing multilingual learning in South African TVET classrooms. Specifically, the paper seeks to investigate how Sesotho morphological structures facilitate translanguaging practices, promote cross-linguistic transfer between Sesotho and English, and support learners' conceptual understanding and linguistic identity within multilingual educational contexts. Thus, the following objectives directed the scope and discourse of this paper:

- To examine the role of Sesotho morphological structures in developing metalinguistic awareness among multilingual TVET students.
- To explore how Sesotho morphology facilitates translanguaging practices in multilingual classroom interactions.

Literature Review

Language, Multilingualism, and Education in South Africa

Multilingualism in education has become a central focus of South African scholarship due to the persistent tension between progressive language-in-education policies and the realities of classroom practice (Department of Education, 1997). Although the Constitution of South Africa recognises 12

official languages and explicitly promotes linguistic equity and social justice, English continues to dominate as the primary language of teaching, learning, and assessment across most educational institutions, including TVET colleges (Akinnaso, 1991; Makalela, 2022). This dominance is not merely a neutral preference but reflects historically entrenched language hierarchies embedded in colonial and apartheid education systems, where African off iilanguages were systematically marginalised and excluded from formal academic and scientific domains.

Consequently, English has been constructed as the language of epistemic authority, upward mobility, and academic legitimacy, while Indigenous languages are often relegated to informal or communicative functions. This linguistic hierarchy results in epistemic exclusion for many learners, particularly those from Sesotho-speaking backgrounds, whose linguistic resources are frequently underutilised in teaching and assessment practices. In such contexts, learners are required to navigate complex disciplinary content through a language that is not always their dominant academic register, which can constrain comprehension, participation, and knowledge construction.

Within this broader context, scholars have increasingly argued for the recognition and integration of African languages as legitimate epistemological tools rather than merely communicative instruments. Research indicates that multilingual pedagogies that incorporate learners' home languages can significantly enhance conceptual understanding, learner participation, and academic performance (Blommaert, 2005). Such approaches challenge monolingual ideologies by positioning multilingualism as a cognitive and pedagogical resource rather than a deficit. However, despite growing policy recognition and scholarly advocacy, implementation remains uneven and often superficial, particularly in vocational and technical education contexts where English is prioritised for purposes of standardisation, mobility, and perceived employability (Chumbow, 1990). This ongoing gap between policy intentions and classroom realities underscores the urgent need for linguistically responsive and contextually grounded pedagogical strategies.

Sesotho Morphology and Linguistic Complexity

Sesotho, as one of the widely spoken Indigenous languages in South Africa, possesses a highly structured and linguistically rich morphological system. Morphology, which refers to the internal structure of words and the ways in which meaning is constructed through morphemes, plays a central role in Sesotho grammar, syntax, and semantic organisation. The language is characterised by a complex noun class system, extensive concordial agreement, and productive affixation processes that collectively enable nuanced and context-sensitive meaning-making (Doke & Mofokeng, 1974). These features demonstrate that Sesotho is not a linguistically simplistic system, but rather a cognitively sophisticated language capable of expressing abstract, technical, and academic concepts.

Despite this linguistic sophistication, Sesotho morphology remains significantly under-researched and underutilised within formal educational settings, particularly in TVET institutions where technical subjects are predominantly taught through English. This marginalisation is partly driven by persistent ideologies that position African languages as inadequate for scientific or vocational discourse, thereby reinforcing the assumption that they lack the lexical and conceptual capacity required for academic knowledge production (Kgwadi, 2022). Such perceptions have led to the continued exclusion of Sesotho from curriculum design, teaching materials, and assessment frameworks.

As a result, learners are often denied meaningful opportunities to draw on their full linguistic repertoires as cognitive and epistemic resources for learning. This exclusion limits their ability to connect new disciplinary knowledge with existing linguistic and cultural frameworks. It also reinforces a deficit view of multilingual learners, who are implicitly expected to abandon their home languages in favour of English rather than leveraging both systems in complementary ways. Consequently, the pedagogical potential of Sesotho morphological structures—such as noun class categorisation, derivational processes, and agglutinative formations—remains largely untapped in supporting conceptual development in vocational education.

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Approach

In response to persistent monolingual educational practices, translanguaging has emerged as a transformative pedagogical approach that reconceptualises how multilingual learners use language in educational settings. Mahan et al. (2024) define translanguaging as the dynamic and integrated use of a multilingual speaker's full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning, communicate effectively, and enhance learning. Rather than treating languages as separate and autonomous systems, translanguaging conceptualises multilingualism as an interconnected and fluid resource that supports cognitive engagement and knowledge construction.

In this framework, language boundaries are not rigid but permeable, allowing learners to strategically move across linguistic systems to facilitate understanding. This approach is particularly relevant in South Africa's linguistically diverse classrooms, where learners frequently operate across multiple languages in both formal and informal contexts. In the South African education landscape, translanguaging has been widely explored as a pedagogical strategy for improving learner participation, comprehension, and engagement, especially in contexts where English serves as the dominant instructional language (Duarte, 2020; Gleason, 2015).

Empirical studies suggest that when learners are permitted to draw on their home languages alongside English, they demonstrate improved conceptual clarity, stronger analytical reasoning, and greater confidence in classroom participation. Translanguaging also plays a crucial role in identity affirmation, as it validates learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds within formal educational spaces (Moloi & Mankayi, 2024). This validation contributes to more inclusive and equitable learning environments, where learners' lived experiences are recognised as legitimate resources for knowledge construction.

However, despite its pedagogical advantages, the implementation of translanguaging in South African education systems remains constrained by structural and institutional barriers. These include rigid assessment regimes, English-dominant curricula, limited teacher training in multilingual pedagogies, and persistent ideological resistance to the formal use of African languages in academic contexts. As a result, translanguaging often remains an informal or ad hoc classroom practice rather than a systematically embedded pedagogical strategy. This highlights the need for deliberate institutional support, curriculum reform, and educator development to fully realise its transformative potential in multilingual education contexts.

Defining Metalinguistic Awareness

Metalinguistic awareness refers to the conscious ability to reflect on, analyse, and manipulate the structural features of language independently of its communicative function (Cummins, 2021). It involves recognising how linguistic units such as morphemes, phonemes, syntax, and semantics operate to create meaning and how these structures can be compared across different languages. In multilingual educational contexts, metalinguistic awareness enables students to identify similarities and differences between languages, transfer linguistic knowledge across language systems, and employ strategic language choices to facilitate comprehension and communication. Consequently, students who possess strong metalinguistic awareness are better able to deconstruct unfamiliar vocabulary, recognise morphological patterns, and construct meaning through conscious reflection on language structures. Within this study, metalinguistic awareness is conceptualised as the cognitive process through which multilingual students utilise their knowledge of Sesotho morphology to interpret English academic discourse, negotiate meaning across languages, and strengthen conceptual understanding through translanguaging practices.

Cross-Linguistic Transfer and Cognitive Development

A central argument in multilingual education research is that languages do not operate as isolated systems within the learner's cognitive architecture; rather, they form an integrated and dynamic linguistic repertoire that supports meaning-making across contexts. Cummins' (2021) interdependence hypothesis provides a foundational explanation for this phenomenon by proposing

that proficiency in one language can positively influence the development of another, particularly through processes of cross-linguistic transfer. From this perspective, literacy skills, conceptual knowledge, and cognitive academic language proficiency developed in a learner's home language can transfer to additional languages, especially in structured educational settings.

Within this theoretical framework, Sesotho becomes a critical cognitive and pedagogical resource rather than a peripheral communicative tool. Learners' understanding of Sesotho grammatical systems—such as noun class structures, concordial agreement, and agglutinative morphological patterns—can be strategically leveraged to support the acquisition of English vocabulary, syntax, and academic discourse structures. For example, the systematic nature of Sesotho noun class agreement can assist learners in recognising patterns of subject–verb concord in English, while morphological segmentation in Sesotho can support decoding unfamiliar English technical terminology. In this sense, linguistic transfer is not accidental but can be actively mediated through pedagogy that acknowledges structural relationships between languages.

Recent empirical studies further reinforce the view that translanguaging and cross-linguistic transfer contribute meaningfully to academic literacy development by enabling learners to establish conceptual bridges between languages (Habók & Magyar, 2018). In multilingual classrooms, learners frequently engage in hybrid linguistic practices, combining Sesotho and English resources to interpret, negotiate, and express complex disciplinary ideas. These practices include code-switching, code-meshing, and morphological adaptation, all of which reflect strategic meaning-making processes rather than linguistic deficiency. On the contrary, such practices demonstrate cognitive agility, as learners actively draw on their full linguistic repertoires to reduce cognitive load, clarify abstract concepts, and enhance retention of new information.

However, despite increasing recognition of multilingual pedagogies, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific structural contribution of Sesotho morphology to cognitive and academic development in TVET contexts. Much of the existing scholarship on multilingual education tends to focus broadly on policy frameworks, language attitudes, or general translanguaging practices without sufficiently examining how the internal linguistic architecture of African languages supports learning processes (Hélot & Fialais, 2014). Similarly, studies by Kaschula and Kretzer (2019) and Mashiya (2010) highlight the importance of multilingualism in education but offer limited engagement with the fine-grained morphological mechanisms through which languages like Sesotho facilitate conceptual understanding and disciplinary learning.

This omission is particularly significant in vocational and technical education contexts, where learners are required to engage with abstract terminology, procedural knowledge, and discipline-specific discourse in English. In such environments, the absence of research on morphological transfer mechanisms means that a potentially powerful pedagogical resource remains largely unrecognised and underutilised. As a result, opportunities to systematically integrate Sesotho linguistic structures into teaching strategies are often overlooked, despite their potential to scaffold comprehension and strengthen conceptual development.

Therefore, this paper addresses a critical gap in the literature by foregrounding Sesotho morphology as an underexplored cognitive and pedagogical resource within TVET education (Kamusella & Ndhlovu, 2018). It extends existing scholarship on multilingualism and translanguaging by shifting analytical attention from general language practices to the structural properties of Sesotho that enable learning. In doing so, it positions Sesotho not merely as a supportive language but as an epistemic tool capable of enhancing cognitive processing, facilitating cross-linguistic transfer, and strengthening academic access.

Ultimately, this contribution aligns with broader debates on linguistic justice, decolonial education, and epistemic inclusion in South Africa. By recognising the pedagogical value embedded in Sesotho's morphological system, the paper advocates for a reconfiguration of language hierarchies in

education—one that validates African languages as active contributors to knowledge production rather than passive instruments of translation or support.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in critical language theory (CLT), which examines the complex relationships between language, power, identity, and social inequality in educational and societal contexts (Freire, 1970). CLT is premised on the understanding that language is not a neutral or purely functional medium of communication, but rather a socially constructed and ideologically loaded system that reflects and reproduces existing power relations. Within this framework, language becomes a site of struggle where dominant linguistic forms are privileged, while marginalised languages are systematically devalued or excluded (Fairclough, 2021). Consequently, language functions as both a tool of communication and an instrument of social stratification.

In the South African context, the historical dominance of English in education is deeply rooted in colonial and apartheid language policies that elevated English and Afrikaans while suppressing Indigenous African languages. Despite the post-1994 constitutional recognition of multilingualism and the formal promotion of linguistic equity, English continues to function as the dominant language of teaching, learning, assessment, and academic validation across most educational institutions, including TVET colleges. This persistent dominance has resulted in the continued marginalisation of Indigenous languages such as Sesotho, which are often excluded from formal academic discourse despite being widely spoken by learners. As a result, multilingual students frequently experience linguistic disempowerment, as their home languages are not fully recognised as legitimate resources for knowledge production and academic engagement.

Within this context, CLT provides a critical analytical lens for interrogating how dominant language ideologies shape pedagogical practices and educational access. It enables a deeper understanding of how linguistic hierarchies are reproduced in classroom settings, often in subtle but powerful ways, through curriculum design, assessment practices, and institutional norms that prioritise English as the default medium of instruction (Lyle, 2008). For many learners in TVET colleges, this results in epistemic exclusion, where access to knowledge is mediated through a language that does not fully align with their everyday linguistic repertoires. CLT therefore, allows this paper to critically examine how such structures limit meaningful participation and reinforce inequalities in educational outcomes.

Furthermore, CLT aligns closely with translanguaging theory in its rejection of monolingual assumptions and its emphasis on linguistic fluidity as a pedagogical and cognitive resource (Freire, 1985). Both perspectives challenge the notion that languages should be treated as separate, bounded systems in educational contexts. Translanguaging, as articulated by García and Wei (2021), recognises that multilingual speakers draw on an integrated linguistic repertoire to make meaning, solve problems, and engage with academic content. Similarly, CLT advocates for the recognition of marginalised linguistic practices as legitimate and valuable forms of knowledge construction (Msila, 2014). Together, these frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation for rethinking the role of language in education, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial contexts.

In this paper, Sesotho morphology is therefore conceptualised not merely as a grammatical system, but as a critical cognitive and pedagogical resource that mediates learning and enhances epistemic access. The integration of Sesotho morphological elements into classroom discourse enables learners to engage in hybrid linguistic practices that combine Sesotho and English in meaningful and strategic ways. These practices include morphological borrowing, code-switching, and semantic mapping, all of which facilitate comprehension and support knowledge construction in complex subject areas. Such linguistic hybridity reflects not linguistic deficiency, but rather linguistic creativity and cognitive agency, as learners actively negotiate meaning across linguistic boundaries (Moloi & Thetso, 2014).

Moreover, CLT is particularly significant in foregrounding the educational and intellectual legitimacy of African languages within formal learning environments. Sesotho, with its highly structured

morphological system—including noun class systems, concordial agreement, and productive affixation—demonstrates considerable linguistic complexity and cognitive depth (Teo, 2019). These features enable precise meaning-making and support the organisation of conceptual knowledge, particularly when learners engage with abstract or technical content (Gleason, 2015; Malete, 1996). From this perspective, Sesotho morphology should not be viewed as peripheral to academic learning but rather as an enabling structure that can facilitate deeper conceptual understanding and linguistic transfer.

The pedagogical incorporation of Sesotho morphological structures, therefore, has the potential to challenge long-standing deficit ideologies that position African languages as unsuitable for academic discourse (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). Instead, it promotes a reconceptualization of these languages as epistemically rich systems capable of supporting multilingual education at all levels, including vocational and technical training. In doing so, it aligns with broader decolonial imperatives aimed at transforming knowledge hierarchies and expanding what counts as legitimate academic language in South African education.

Ultimately, CLT provides a powerful theoretical lens for this paper by enabling a critical interrogation of linguistic inequality while simultaneously supporting the advocacy for more inclusive and socially just pedagogical practices. It positions Sesotho not as a supplementary classroom tool, but as a central resource for translanguaging, identity affirmation, and epistemic access. Through this lens, the paper contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on linguistic justice, multilingual education, and the decolonisation of knowledge production in TVET contexts.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore how Sesotho morphology functions as a pedagogical resource for developing metalinguistic awareness and facilitating translanguaging practices in multilingual TVET classrooms. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions within natural educational settings, thereby providing rich and contextualised insights into multilingual pedagogical practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Furthermore, qualitative inquiry is well-suited to studies that seek to understand the meanings participants attach to social and linguistic phenomena rather than to quantify relationships between variables.

The study employed participatory action research (PAR) as its research design because it emphasises collaboration between researchers and participants to identify educational challenges, implement contextually relevant interventions, critically reflect on practice, and generate sustainable improvements in teaching and learning (Kemmis et al., 2022. PAR positions participants as co-researchers who actively contribute to the generation of knowledge through cycles of inquiry and action rather than merely serving as sources of data. This collaborative orientation was particularly appropriate for the present study because it enabled lecturers and students to collectively explore how Sesotho morphology could be utilised as a pedagogical resource for multilingual learning and the development of metalinguistic awareness.

The PAR process was operationalised through Kemmis et al.'s (2022) cyclical framework of planning, action, observation, and reflection. During the planning phase, the researcher collaborated with lecturers and students to identify classroom challenges associated with the dominance of English, and the limited pedagogical use of Sesotho within multilingual TVET classrooms. Through collaborative discussions, participants identified difficulties related to conceptual understanding, learner participation, and the inability to utilise Indigenous linguistic resources when engaging with vocational content.

The action phase involved implementing translanguaging activities that deliberately integrated Sesotho morphological structures into classroom instruction. Lecturers encouraged students to analyse English technical vocabulary through Sesotho noun class systems, affixation patterns, and

morphological segmentation while discussing disciplinary concepts. Students were encouraged to explain concepts using both Sesotho and English, compare grammatical structures across languages, and collaboratively negotiate meaning through multilingual dialogue. These classroom activities were specifically designed to strengthen learners' metalinguistic awareness by encouraging conscious reflection on the structural features of both languages and their relationship to conceptual understanding (Cummins, 2021; García & Wei, 2021).

During the observation phase, the researcher documented participants' engagement with the intervention through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Particular attention was given to how students employed Sesotho morphology to interpret English academic terminology, facilitate cross-linguistic transfer, negotiate meaning, and participate more confidently in classroom discussions. Classroom interactions were examined for evidence of translanguaging practices, morphological awareness, and metalinguistic reasoning as students moved flexibly between Sesotho and English to construct knowledge.

The reflection phase involved collaborative evaluation sessions in which students, lecturers, and the researcher reflected on the effectiveness of the intervention and identified opportunities for improving multilingual pedagogical practice. Participants discussed how the integration of Sesotho morphology enhanced conceptual understanding, strengthened linguistic identity, and increased classroom participation while simultaneously identifying structural constraints such as English-only assessment practices and the limited development of technical terminology in Sesotho. The insights generated through these reflective discussions informed recommendations for strengthening multilingual pedagogies and institutional language practices within TVET education, thereby completing one cycle of participatory inquiry while informing future cycles of pedagogical improvement (Kemmis et al., 2022).

The study was conducted at a selected Maluti TVET college in South Africa, where multilingual teaching and learning practices are common. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with direct experience of multilingual classroom interaction, comprising 16 Sesotho-speaking students and four lecturers. Their experiences provided valuable insights into the pedagogical use of Sesotho morphology within multilingual educational contexts.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, allowing methodological triangulation and enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences regarding translanguaging and language learning, while focus group discussions encouraged collaborative reflection on multilingual classroom practices. Classroom observations complemented these methods by documenting authentic language use and interaction during instructional activities.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022), involving data familiarisation, systematic coding, theme generation, theme refinement, theme definition, and interpretation. Thematic analysis provided a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying recurring patterns related to metalinguistic awareness, translanguaging, cross-linguistic transfer, linguistic identity, and pedagogical practices. The iterative nature of thematic analysis complemented the cyclical process of PAR by allowing themes emerging from participants' reflections and classroom interactions to inform subsequent interpretation and pedagogical recommendations (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Throughout the research process, ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for participants' linguistic and cultural identities were observed in accordance with contemporary qualitative research standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). By integrating collaborative inquiry with iterative reflection and thematic analysis, the methodological approach generated contextually grounded insights into how Sesotho morphology can function as a

cognitive and pedagogical resource for developing metalinguistic awareness and supporting multilingual teaching and learning in South African TVET classrooms.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the rigour and quality of the study, the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability guided the establishment of trustworthiness throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation by integrating semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, thereby enabling the corroboration of findings from multiple data sources. Prolonged engagement with participants throughout the PAR cycles and collaborative reflection sessions further strengthened the authenticity of participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Dependability was achieved by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting each stage of the research process, including planning, intervention, observation, reflection, data generation, coding, and thematic analysis. Confirmability was promoted through reflexive journaling and continuous comparison of emerging themes with participants' accounts and classroom observations to minimise researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In addition, transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and multilingual classroom practices, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

Ethical principles and researcher reflexivity were integral to the study. The researcher adopted a reflexive stance throughout the PAR process by critically examining personal assumptions, methodological decisions, and interactions with participants to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than researcher subjectivity. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection, and permission to conduct the study was granted by the management of the selected Maluti TVET college. All participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study and voluntarily provided informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of research data, while participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice. These ethical and reflexive procedures strengthened the integrity, transparency, and trustworthiness of the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Results

This section presents the findings generated from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations conducted in multilingual TVET classrooms in South Africa. Furthermore, the results are organised thematically according to the recurring patterns that emerged during data analysis. The findings reveal how Sesotho morphology functions as a pedagogical resource that promotes translanguaging, linguistic identity, and cross-linguistic transfer among multilingual students. In addition, participants' responses and classroom interactions are used to demonstrate the educational significance of Sesotho morphemes in multilingual learning environments.

Dominance of English in Multilingual Classrooms

The findings indicate that English remains the dominant language of teaching and learning in TVET classrooms, with limited use of Sesotho during instructional interactions. Most participants reported that classroom communication is predominantly conducted in English, while Sesotho is rarely used. For instance, one participant stated, "Most of the time we use English. We do not use Sesotho; we always try to use English," while another confirmed, "I do not use Sesotho in class." These responses reflect the continued privileging of English in South African higher education contexts, despite policy intentions promoting multilingualism. This dominance aligns with broader findings that English remains the primary academic language, often marginalising African languages in formal education spaces.

Sesotho Morphology as a Pedagogical Resource

Despite the dominance of English, participants strongly indicated that Sesotho morphology significantly enhances understanding and conceptual learning. Many students reported that translating English concepts into Sesotho improves comprehension, with one noting that "using Sesotho morphemes helps us to understand English better," and another adding that "students understand better when English words are translated into Sesotho words." This supports research indicating that translanguaging practices improve academic literacy and conceptual development in multilingual classrooms. Similarly, participants highlighted that knowledge of Sesotho grammar facilitates interpretation and meaning-making, as one explained: "Knowing Sesotho grammar enables me to interpret and translate English words into Sesotho."

Furthermore, learners emphasised that Sesotho-based explanations make learning more accessible and contextually relevant. One participant stated that the use of Sesotho "helps students to have a better understanding and can relate to issues in their own context," while another added that it "makes learning relatable and easy." These findings correspond with studies showing that translanguaging enhances learner engagement and supports academic literacy development by activating prior linguistic knowledge. Additionally, participants noted that Sesotho encourages creativity and critical thinking, suggesting its potential as a cognitive tool in multilingual education.

Challenges in Integrating Sesotho in TVET Education

However, despite its perceived benefits, participants also raised concerns about the use of Sesotho in formal instructional settings. Some argued that Sesotho cannot be fully implemented as a language of learning because not all students share the same linguistic background. For example, one participant stated, "Sesotho cannot be used as language of learning because other students are not Sesotho speaking." In addition, concerns were raised about the lack of technical terminology in Sesotho for vocational subjects, with one participant noting that "Sesotho language has no technical jargons for vocational subjects." These challenges reflect broader systemic limitations in implementing multilingual pedagogies within TVET institutions.

Participants also highlighted institutional contradictions, particularly the mismatch between classroom practices and assessment requirements. One participant explained that although Sesotho facilitates understanding during lessons, "when coming to examination, we are expected to write in English which poses a threat." This tension reflects ongoing structural privileging of English in assessment systems, despite multilingual classroom realities.

Perceptions of Translanguaging in Multilingual Classrooms

The findings further show generally positive perceptions of translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy. Many participants defined translanguaging as the use of multiple languages to enhance understanding, with one stating that it "assists students to conceptualise and retain critical information," while another described it as a strategy that "makes learning and papering easy for students to pass." These views align with research suggesting that translanguaging supports academic achievement and learner participation in multilingual contexts.

Moreover, participants believed that translanguaging reinforces linguistic identity and inclusivity. One participant stated that it "aids students' understanding, reinforces their identity and enables their learning capacities," while another argued that it is "the best strategy to accommodate other ethnicities." Similarly, studies have shown that translanguaging strengthens students' multilingual repertoires and supports epistemic access in diverse classrooms.

However, some participants expressed uncertainty or scepticism, with one stating, "I don't know what translanguaging is," while another noted that "some words are difficult to understand when using translanguaging." Despite these concerns, the overall data suggest that combining Sesotho and English in classroom interaction enhances comprehension and learning outcomes. Consequently, the findings

affirm translanguaging as a valuable pedagogical approach for supporting multilingual education in TVET contexts.

Integrating Metalinguistic Awareness into the Findings

The findings indicate that Sesotho morphology functions as an important catalyst for developing metalinguistic awareness among multilingual TVET students. Participants demonstrated the ability to consciously compare Sesotho and English linguistic structures, particularly through noun class systems, affixation, and morphological segmentation, to facilitate understanding of unfamiliar academic concepts. Rather than merely translating between languages, learners actively analysed linguistic forms, recognised structural relationships, and manipulated morphological patterns to construct meaning across their multilingual repertoires. This heightened awareness enabled students to identify grammatical correspondences, infer the meanings of unfamiliar terminology, and apply prior linguistic knowledge to new learning contexts. The findings, therefore, suggest that translanguaging practices supported not only comprehension but also the development of sophisticated metalinguistic skills that enhanced learners' cognitive engagement with academic content.

Morphological Structures Supporting Conceptual Understanding

The findings demonstrate that Sesotho morphological structures function as important cognitive resources that enable students to negotiate meaning and understand technical concepts in multilingual TVET classrooms. Participants indicated that they frequently relied on familiar Sesotho morphemes and grammatical structures to interpret English academic discourse, illustrating how first-language knowledge facilitates conceptual understanding in a second language. For example, the verbal construction *Ke a bala* (I am reading) comprises the subject marker *ke-*, the present tense marker *-a-*, and the verb root *bala*, while constructions such as *Ha ke bale* (I do not read) and *Ke a mo bona* (I see him/her) illustrate how negation and object marking are encoded through distinct morphemes. Similarly, noun class structures such as *motho/batho* (person/people) and *sekolo/dikolo* (school/schools) demonstrate systematic agreement patterns that strengthen learners' understanding of grammatical relationships, whereas affixation processes including future marking (*Ke tla bala*), causative extensions (*ruta→rutisa*), applicative forms (*hlekela*), and passive constructions (*rutwa*) reveal how prefixes and suffixes modify meaning. These linguistic features enable learners to analyse unfamiliar vocabulary, recognise recurring grammatical patterns, and transfer morphological knowledge to English academic language, thereby enhancing metalinguistic awareness and conceptual understanding.

Translanguaging and Hybrid Sesotho–English Constructions

An equally significant finding concerns the widespread use of hybrid Sesotho–English constructions during classroom interactions, reflecting the dynamic multilingual practices adopted by both lecturers and students. Participants reported frequent use of expressions such as *Ke downloada assignment*, *Bana ba submita diproject*, and *Ke tshwanetse ho revaisa for exam*, in which English lexical items are integrated into Sesotho grammatical structures through the addition of subject concords, adapted verb endings, and noun class prefixes such as *di-file*, *ma-test*, and *di-book*. Classroom discourse further demonstrated strategic code-switching through utterances such as *"Ngolang answers ka English feela," "This concept e bolela hore . . ."* and *"Open your books le bale page ena,"* illustrating how teachers alternated between English and Sesotho to clarify concepts, scaffold understanding, and reinforce technical terminology. Rather than representing linguistic deficiency, these hybrid constructions exemplify translanguaging as a sophisticated pedagogical resource that enables learners to draw simultaneously on their full linguistic repertoire to negotiate meaning, connect new knowledge with familiar linguistic structures, and improve epistemic access in multilingual TVET classrooms.

Discussion

The findings of this paper reveal a persistent tension between the dominance of English in TVET classrooms and the multilingual realities of students in South Africa. While English remains the primary language of teaching and assessment, learners continue to draw on Sesotho as a meaning-making resource to support comprehension, mediate understanding, and negotiate complex academic content. This reflects broader systemic patterns in South African higher education, where English is often positioned as the default language of epistemic access despite explicit multilingual policy commitments (Makalela, 2022; Mkhize & Balfour, 2023). In practice, this creates a disconnect between policy ideals and classroom realities, resulting in the continued marginalisation of African languages in formal instruction. Sesotho, in this regard, is not excluded due to a lack of pedagogical value, but rather due to entrenched linguistic hierarchies and institutional ideologies that associate English with intellectual authority, employability, and academic success.

Notwithstanding this dominance, the findings strongly demonstrate that Sesotho morphology plays a crucial and enabling role in enhancing conceptual understanding and academic access. Participants consistently reported that translating or rephrasing English content into Sesotho improves clarity, reduces cognitive load, and supports deeper engagement with subject matter. This aligns with translanguaging scholarship, which argues that multilingual learners do not compartmentalise languages but instead draw on an integrated linguistic repertoire to construct meaning (García & Wei, 2021). Within this framework, Sesotho morphological structures—particularly noun class systems, agreement markers, and agglutinative formations—serve as cognitive scaffolds that support the interpretation of English terminology. These morphological features allow learners to deconstruct unfamiliar academic vocabulary and reconstruct meaning through familiar linguistic patterns, thereby strengthening cross-linguistic transfer and conceptual retention (Cummins, 2021). In this sense, Sesotho is not merely a supportive language but an active semiotic resource in the learning process.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of linguistic relatability, cultural resonance, and identity affirmation in educational engagement. Participants indicated that the incorporation of Sesotho into classroom interaction makes learning more accessible, emotionally engaging, and contextually grounded. This supports Probyn's (2020) assertion that translanguaging pedagogies enhance learner participation by validating students' linguistic identities and lived experiences. When learners are allowed to draw on Sesotho, they are not forced to abandon their linguistic identities at the classroom door but instead are encouraged to integrate home and school literacies. This integration fosters increased confidence, reduces anxiety associated with English-only instruction, and promotes active participation. Moreover, learners reported that Sesotho facilitates creativity and critical thinking by enabling them to connect abstract academic concepts with familiar socio-cultural references, thereby deepening epistemic access and reinforcing meaningful learning.

In addition, the pedagogical value of Sesotho morphology extends beyond comprehension to the development of cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness. The ability to shift between Sesotho and English encourages learners to compare linguistic structures, identify patterns, and develop analytical awareness of language as a system. This process strengthens their ability to interpret disciplinary discourse in English while maintaining conceptual grounding in their first language. Such bilingual cognitive engagement is consistent with Cummins' (2021) interdependence hypothesis, which posits that proficiency in a first language can positively transfer to second-language academic development. Therefore, Sesotho morphology functions not only as a bridge for understanding but also as a tool for developing higher-order thinking skills essential in TVET contexts.

However, the paper also reveals significant structural, institutional, and ideological constraints that limit the full integration of Sesotho in TVET education. Participants expressed concerns regarding the absence of standardised technical terminology in Sesotho, particularly in engineering and vocational fields, which restricts its formal application in academic writing and assessment. In addition, the continued requirement to complete assessments exclusively in English reinforces the dominance of

English as the gatekeeper of academic success. These challenges reflect broader systemic inequalities in language policy implementation, where African languages are formally recognised but remain under-resourced in terms of terminology development, teaching materials, and institutional support (Batyi, 2022). As a result, a gap emerges between multilingual policy intentions and classroom implementation, perpetuating epistemic inequality.

The development of technical terminology in Sesotho requires a collaborative and systematic approach involving language authorities, educators, students, and industry stakeholders to ensure that specialised vocabulary is linguistically accurate, pedagogically meaningful, culturally relevant, and responsive to contemporary vocational and technical fields. Language bodies such as the Pan South African Language Board, the Sesotho National Language Body, and university language units should lead the standardisation and development of technical terminology by drawing on Sesotho morphological principles and producing multilingual technical dictionaries, glossaries, and digital terminology databases. At the same time, lecturers should play an active role by identifying concepts that require Sesotho equivalents through their classroom experiences and participating in collaborative curriculum development, action research, and terminology workshops. Their practical knowledge of students' learning challenges can help ensure that newly developed terminology effectively supports conceptual understanding and multilingual teaching practices within TVET education.

Equally important is the participation of students and industry partners in the terminology development process. As multilingual speakers who frequently engage in translanguaging, students often create informal equivalents for complex technical concepts during collaborative learning activities, providing authentic linguistic resources that can inform the development of accessible and widely accepted terminology. Industry experts, employers, and professional bodies can further ensure that Sesotho technical vocabulary reflects workplace realities, technological developments, and occupational standards through partnerships with TVET institutions that produce bilingual manuals, glossaries, and training materials. In addition, digital technologies and open-access terminology platforms can facilitate the continuous review, refinement, and dissemination of specialised vocabulary across disciplines. Such sustained collaboration would strengthen Sesotho as a language of teaching, learning, and professional communication while enhancing epistemic access, multilingual education, and the broader decolonisation of knowledge production in South African TVET institutions.

The development of metalinguistic awareness emerges as one of the most significant pedagogical outcomes of Sesotho morphological translanguaging practices. By consciously engaging with Sesotho morphological structures while interpreting English academic discourse, learners developed an enhanced capacity to analyse language as a system rather than merely as a medium of communication. This analytical ability facilitated cross-linguistic transfer by enabling students to recognise structural similarities between Sesotho and English and to apply existing linguistic knowledge to unfamiliar concepts. Such findings reinforce Cummins' (2021) interdependence hypothesis, which posits that cognitive and linguistic competencies developed in one language can support learning in another language. Furthermore, the findings extend translanguaging scholarship by demonstrating that the pedagogical value of Indigenous African languages lies not only in promoting inclusion and identity affirmation but also in fostering metalinguistic awareness that strengthens higher-order thinking, conceptual understanding, and academic literacy. Consequently, Sesotho morphology should be recognised as a cognitive and epistemic resource capable of supporting multilingual learning and advancing linguistically responsive pedagogies within South African TVET education.

Moreover, while translanguaging practices were generally perceived positively by participants, some demonstrated limited familiarity with the concept or uncertainty regarding its pedagogical legitimacy. This indicates a disconnect between everyday linguistic practices and formal educational discourse, where multilingual communication occurs informally but is not always recognised as an intentional teaching strategy. It also suggests the need for greater professional development among educators, many of whom may lack training in structured multilingual pedagogy. Without institutional support,

translanguaging risks remaining an informal or incidental practice rather than a systematically integrated instructional approach.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the findings underscore the need to reconsider dominant monolingual ideologies in TVET education through a decolonial lens. The privileging of English can be understood as part of a historical continuum of linguistic coloniality that continues to shape knowledge production and access in postcolonial education systems. In contrast, the strategic inclusion of Sesotho morphology represents a move toward epistemic justice, where African languages are not merely accommodated but actively positioned as legitimate resources for knowledge construction. This shift challenges the assumption that academic knowledge must be mediated exclusively through English and instead affirms the epistemological value of Indigenous languages in vocational and technical education.

In light of these findings, several recommendations emerge. Firstly, TVET institutions should formally recognise and institutionalise translanguaging as a legitimate pedagogical strategy rather than treating it as an informal classroom practice. Lecturers should be trained to integrate Sesotho and English in a structured and purposeful manner to enhance conceptual clarity and learner engagement. Secondly, curriculum developers and language bodies should prioritise the systematic development of technical terminology in Sesotho, particularly in high-demand vocational fields, to strengthen its functional capacity in academic and workplace contexts. Thirdly, continuing professional development programmes should be implemented to equip educators with multilingual pedagogical strategies, with particular emphasis on how Sesotho morphological structures can be leveraged as cognitive and instructional tools. Fourthly, assessment frameworks should be gradually restructured to reflect multilingual realities, allowing for the strategic use of Sesotho in formative assessment phases while still supporting progression toward academic English proficiency.

Overall, the paper confirms that Sesotho morphology is a valuable yet underutilised pedagogical resource within TVET education. When deliberately and systematically integrated into multilingual teaching practices, it has the potential to enhance comprehension, promote inclusivity, strengthen learner identity, and improve overall academic outcomes. Importantly, its pedagogical value extends beyond language support to broader questions of epistemic access and educational equity. Recognising and harnessing this resource is therefore not only a pedagogical imperative but also a step toward a more socially just and linguistically responsive education system in South Africa.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how Sesotho morphology can be conceptualised and utilised as a pedagogical resource within multilingual TVET classrooms in South Africa. The findings demonstrate a persistent tension between the continued dominance of English as the official language of instruction and assessment, and the lived multilingual realities of students who actively draw on Sesotho as a meaning-making resource. Rather than functioning as separate linguistic systems, Sesotho and English operate in an interconnected manner within classroom practices, where learners strategically mobilise Sesotho morphological knowledge to support interpretation, comprehension, and academic engagement.

A key finding of the paper is that Sesotho morphological structures—particularly noun class systems, concordial agreement, and affixation patterns—play a significant role in facilitating cross-linguistic transfer. These structures enable learners to deconstruct unfamiliar English terminology, identify semantic relationships, and reconstruct meaning in ways that enhance conceptual understanding. In this sense, Sesotho functions not as an alternative or competing instructional language, but as a cognitive and linguistic bridge that supports access to complex academic and vocational knowledge. This finding aligns with interdependence theories of multilingualism, which emphasise the transferability of cognitive and academic skills across languages within a shared linguistic repertoire.

Furthermore, the paper confirms that translanguaging practices are not only present but are an inherent feature of multilingual TVET classrooms, even in the absence of formal institutional recognition. Students naturally alternate between Sesotho and English in order to clarify concepts, negotiate meaning, and express understanding in more accessible ways. These practices reflect linguistic adaptability, cognitive resourcefulness, and identity affirmation, as learners draw on their full linguistic repertoires to engage meaningfully with academic content. Importantly, such practices challenge monolingual assumptions about learning by demonstrating that knowledge construction in multilingual contexts is inherently dynamic and hybrid.

However, despite these positive pedagogical realities, the findings also reveal significant structural and institutional constraints that limit the full integration of Sesotho in teaching and learning. These include the absence of standardised technical terminology in Sesotho, the continued dominance of English in formal assessment practices, and the limited institutional recognition of African languages as legitimate academic resources. These constraints reflect deeper systemic and ideological barriers rooted in historical language hierarchies that continue to privilege English as the primary medium of academic legitimacy. As a result, the translanguaging practices observed in classrooms often remain informal, unsupported, and under-theorised within institutional frameworks.

Overall, the paper concludes that Sesotho morphology represents a valuable but underutilised pedagogical and cognitive resource within multilingual TVET education. When appropriately recognised and integrated into teaching and learning practices, it has the potential to enhance conceptual understanding, improve learner participation, and strengthen epistemic access for students from Sesotho-speaking backgrounds. More broadly, the paper argues that the inclusion of Sesotho morphology in educational practice contributes to the advancement of linguistic inclusion, epistemic justice, and more equitable learning environments.

In light of these findings, the paper underscores the need for a deliberate shift in language-in-education practices within TVET institutions—one that moves beyond tokenistic recognition of multilingualism towards the systematic integration of African languages as active tools of knowledge construction. Such a shift would not only improve learning outcomes but also contribute to the broader decolonisation of education by challenging entrenched linguistic hierarchies and validating Indigenous languages as legitimate and powerful academic resources.

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