Editorial

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Education is widely recognised as a powerful driver of human development and societal prosperity. However, millions of learners face structural barriers throughout their learning journey. These include inequitable access to education - often due to inadequate physical infrastructure (electricity and internet access), limited learning resources and underqualified teachers. Yet another barrier exists that is often overlooked: namely, learners being taught in a language they do not speak or understand well.

A UNESCO (2025) report estimates that approximately 40% of learners worldwide are taught in a language they do not fully understand, particularly in multilingual regions of sub-Saharan Africa. This creates a barrier to learner achievement. Evidence from the OECD's (2023) PISA 2022 report, shows that learners whose home language differs from the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) perform poorly in Reading, Mathematics, and Science. Importantly, such learners typically remain disadvantaged throughout their learning journey. This contributes to societal inequality as well as the growth and prosperity of the country.

This challenge is exacerbated by the rapid pace of technological change associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Young people who already struggle to engage meaningfully with curriculum content are also expected to navigate an increasingly complex digital environment. Addressing language-of-learning barriers is therefore essential to ensuring equitable access in this evolving landscape.

This issue is especially pronounced in South Africa, which has an estimated population of 63.1 million (Statistics South Africa, 2025), and 12 official languages including sign language. Only 8.7% of the population speak English as a home language (Statistics South Africa, 2023), despite its widespread use as the LoLT. The Language-in-Education Policy (Department of Education, 1997) stipulates that the LoLT must be an official language. In practice, however, most learners switch to English as the LoLT in Grade 4 often before attaining sufficient proficiency to learn effectively. This compounds the existing educational challenges particularly in a context where approximately 37% of young people aged 15 to 24 are not in education, employment or training (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Findings from international assessments like PIRLS and TIMMS reinforce the urgency of addressing learner underachievement. The 2021 PIRLS study showed that 81% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, with national performance declining since 2016 (Mullis et al., 2023). TIMSS results likewise reveal low performance at the primary level and deep inequalities aligned with school socioeconomic status (Mullis et al., 2020).

With high-quality education being essential not only for both individual development and societal growth and prosperity, addressing language-of-learning barriers needs to be a priority for policymakers and educators. One promising approach to easing the transition from mother tongue teaching to

English is translanguaging. 'Translanguaging refers to the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages' (García & Wei, 2014: 2). It recognises that multilingual learners naturally draw on all their linguistic resources to think, reason, and communicate. This approach enables English to be learned through meaning, aligning with UNESCO's guidance which states that 'multilingual education based on the mother tongue lays the foundation for literacy and learning' (UNESCO, 2025).

In this 21st edition of The IJTL, the first two articles investigate through qualitative research the efficacy of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach to supporting learning. The first explores its use in a cross-age reading programme in primary school learners in Cape Town South Africa, while the second investigates how translanguaging supports can be used to scaffold STEM education for learners in Zimbabwe. Both show positive outcomes for meaning-based learning which significantly enhances conceptual understanding.

A further set of articles address students entering higher education. In a case study, the authors examine constraints on first-generation, first-year Law students when choosing elective modules without sufficient information. A number of recommendations are made. The following article explores how students access information in the 4IR, recommending the integration of literacy information programmes into the curriculum.

Other contributions investigate digital and pedagogical innovations. One study shows that digital curriculum mapping is useful but constrained by inconsistent institutional systems and limited training. Another evaluates the use of social media applications as pedagogical tools by primary teachers. While the findings show positive impacts on learning outcomes, teachers' limited training and access hinders more effective implementation. The following two articles focus on disciplinary modules. One examines a seamless learning strategy in a social entrepreneurship module, finding that it enhances accessibility and engagement. The other uses a qualitative Delphi approach, to identify graduate attributes in an undergraduate tourism project that align with global industry expectations. This cluster concludes with two studies on postgraduate education. The first explores a culture driven doctoral programme grounded in Appreciative Inquiry, demonstrating its role in supporting doctoral success. The other examines postgraduate students; experiences of collaborative formative assessment. A number of recommendations are made.

In *Practitioners Corner*, the focus turns to inclusive learning environments. The authors examine bullying in foundation-year classrooms and highlight the critical role of foundation-phase teachers in fostering safe classrooms conducive to learning.

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