Reading & Writing - Journal of the Literacy Association of South Africa
ISSN: (Online) 2308-1422, (Print) 2079-8245

Knowledge and practice standards for pre-service language and literacy teachers: Looking back, looking forward

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Dates:
Received: 27 Feb. 2026
Accepted: 08 June 2026
Published: 19 Aug. 2026

How to cite this article:
Phekani, M.N., Tembe, L.E., Van der Haar, H.H., Robinson, M. & Reed, Y., 2026, 'Knowledge and practice standards for pre-service language and literacy teachers: Looking back, looking forward', *Reading & Writing* 17(1), a664. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v17i1.664

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Background: In 2016, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training initiated a project to develop standards to guide English and Mathematics teacher educators in curriculum design and implementation.

Objectives: The investigation aimed to identify key affordances and limitations of the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) knowledge and practice standards for the teaching of English, and to identify directions for their refinement and take-up. The article traces the conceptual foundations of the draft standards, examines their alignment with current language and literacies education scholarship, with South African directions in language education, and with conceptions of teacher knowledge. It also explores how the standards are being interpreted in teacher educator practice.

Method: Using the frame of reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-for-action, the study makes use of documentary sources and vignettes to provide a literature and practice-informed account of the standards. It draws on archival material, recent scholarship in the field of language and literacies teaching and learning, South African education policy documents, and accounts of language teacher educators' engagement with the standards.

Results: While the draft standards reflect widely accepted content and pedagogic knowledge required of language and literacies teacher educators and classroom teachers, the role of learners' full linguistic repertoires in learning could be more central to the standards, as could the increasing importance of digital literacy. Furthermore, the standards need to be more accessible to the community of teacher educators.

Conclusion: The standards provide a valuable benchmark against which teacher educators of English can reflect on their own practice and develop their curricula. Some revisiting of the standards is needed to foreground emerging directions in research and practice.

Contribution: Greater clarity, accessibility, and official endorsement of the standards are recommended to strengthen implementation and enhance teacher education in language and literacies.

Keywords: Primary Teacher Education; teacher education standards; Bachelor of Education; language and literacies; teacher educator engagement; linguistic repertoires; translanguaging.

Introduction

Language and literacy teaching in South Africa takes place within multilingual, socially complex contexts in which language functions not only as a subject of study but also as the primary medium for learning across the curriculum. The preparation of teachers who can respond effectively to learner and community diversity is therefore of both educational and social significance. South African research has repeatedly highlighted variation in the content and coherence of language and literacy components of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes (Bowie & Reed 2016; Deacon 2016), raising questions about how new teachers are prepared to teach reading, viewing, writing and presenting in linguistically complex classrooms.

In response to these concerns, in 2016 the South African Department of Higher Education and Training initiated the development of Knowledge and Practice Standards to guide curriculum

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Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Advancing Literacy through Teacher Education: Insights from the PrimTEd Language and Literacy Initiative' under the expert guidance of guest editors Dr Mmamoyahabo Constance Makgabo, Prof. Maureen Robinson, Dr Elsie Carolyn Ann Kok and Dr Meshack Qetelo Moloi.

design and implementation in Bachelor of Education (BEd) programmes. The intention was not to prescribe standardised curricula, but to outline core elements of professional knowledge and practice required for effective language and literacies teaching.

A decade after work began on their conceptualisation the language and literacies standards remain in draft form and have not been widely acknowledged within ITE programmes. Since their initial publication in 2019, there have been significant shifts in both research and policy, including increased engagement with translanguaging pedagogies, the piloting of mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) and engagement with digital literacies and artificial intelligence. To date, there has been limited scholarly analysis of the draft standards in relation to these developments, and little documentation of how teacher educators interpret and use them in practice. This represents the research gap addressed in this article.

The analysis undertaken in this article is informed by sociocultural understandings of language and learning, as well as by multilingual and translanguaging perspectives that look to learners' full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning. The authors revisit the draft 'Knowledge and Practice Standards for primary teacher education graduates: Language and literacies' (2019) to trace their conceptual underpinnings, examine their alignment with developments in language and literacies literature and South African education policy, and to explore how they are interpreted in teacher educator practice, with a view to identifying directions for their refinement for use in current and future ITE contexts.

Background

Why knowledge and practice standards to guide Initial Teacher Education Research Project languages and literacies curriculum development?

A key finding of the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP), which concluded in 2014, was that across five case study universities offering Intermediate Phase ITE, courses varied substantially in both content and duration (Deacon 2016). This variation affected preparation for teaching English as a subject (home or first additional language) and for using English as the language of learning and teaching, often in multilingual classroom contexts (Bowie & Reed 2016; Deacon 2016).

In 2016, the Department of Higher Education and Training invited teacher educators from all South African universities offering BEd programmes in primary school education to participate in designing knowledge and practice standards that could guide lecturers in the design and implementation of ITE curricula across universities. This initiative was not taken to promote uniformity across universities, but rather to identify key elements of language and literacies content and pedagogic content knowledge required of all teachers in South Africa's primary school classrooms. With funding from the European Union, the PrimTEd Project was launched.

Designing knowledge and practice standards for initial teacher education languages and literacies curricula

The information presented in this section is drawn from PrimTEd Combined Language and Literacies Working Group (CLLWG) newsletters, workshop presentations, and personal communication with CLLWG members. The CLLWG, of which one of the authors of this article was a member, was tasked with designing draft standards for the teaching of both English and African languages as 'home' and 'additional' languages.[1]

The CLLWG developed the following rationale for language and literacies teacher education standards (PrimTEd 2021):

> Teachers need to have knowledge of: the theoretical, historical, and research-based-foundations of reading and writing; language structures and conventions; speaking, listening, viewing, reading, and presenting, and the processes and phase appropriate instruction used in teaching and developing these; the role of the language and literacy teacher within and across subjects. (p. 17)

Several research-based and participatory processes informed the development of the standards:

- An extensive literature review, with analysis of the competencies required by new teachers drawn from this review.
- Informal interviews with teacher educators at most South African universities and collection of ITE curriculum documents from them.
- Presentation of draft standards at national consultative workshops attended by both university academics and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in the field of languages and literacies education.
- Adaptation of standards in response to contributions from workshop participants.
- Development of assessment criteria in collaboration with members of the PrimTEd Assessment working group.
- In support of African language teaching, preparation of an annotated bibliography of research on early reading in African languages.

As part of a national consultative process, the knowledge and practice standards for language and literacies teaching (together with those for Mathematics teaching) were presented at PrimTEd's Annual National Dialogue in October 2019. This meeting was attended by representatives of a wide range of stakeholders: from PrimTEd working groups, public and private universities, the national and provincial Department of Education, the South African Council of Educators, teacher unions, the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority and the National Education Collaboration Trust.

1.It should be noted that the terms 'home' and 'first additional' language are used in the Department of Basic Education's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement documents. Currently Grade 12 national examinations and learning and teaching support materials, such as textbooks, also use these contested terms. We place both between inverted commas to signal that they do not accurately reflect the fluidity and richness of teachers' and learners' language use in multilingual classroom, home, and community contexts, with the boundedness and limitations of such a conceptualisation of language potentially having disabling rather than enabling consequences in the classroom.

In their current form, the draft language standards are comprised of four separate sections and are intended to cover both Foundation and Intermediate Phases. Known as the *Standards for South African language and literacy graduate teachers* each section begins with the words 'Graduate teachers' followed by a general statement about what new graduates are expected to know and be able to demonstrate in their practice the following teacher standards:

- **Knowledge:** graduate teachers know language and literacy and how to teach learners to read and write.
- **Practice:** graduate teachers can organise systematic language and literacy instruction, with a focus on reading and writing, guided by the curriculum requirements.
- **English First Additional Language (EFAL):** graduate teachers demonstrate that they understand the knowledge, skills and processes required to teach English as a First Additional Language.
- **First Additional Language (FAL):** graduate teachers demonstrate that they understand the knowledge, skills and processes required to teach African languages or Afrikaans as First Additional Languages.

These general introductory statements are followed by competences to be attained, specific outcomes to be achieved and a detailed outline of assessment criteria within three broad domains: core language and literacies proficiency, pedagogic strategies for teaching English, and theories of language acquisition and development.

Table 1 gives examples of knowledge standards within these three domains, while Table 2 outlines what counts as evidence of achievement within one of the practice standards.

Theoretical underpinnings of the language and literacies standards

Alongside generating information through the standards development process, the CLLWG had extensive debates about the theoretical underpinnings of these standards. Agreement was reached on the following:

- That the standards be informed by sociocultural theories of learning, common to which is that language is a crucial tool for learning.
- That provision of comprehensible input is central to learning additional languages.
- That teachers' and learners' full linguistic repertoires should not only be acknowledged, but should be central to language and literacies' learning.
- That learning to read and reading to learn should be guided by a 'balanced approach' which takes account of what are broadly termed 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches to texts.
- That visual literacy plays a crucial role in learning across the curriculum.
- That teachers and learners need to be critically literate and critically visually literate.
- That teacher knowledge is multi-faceted and includes content (subject) knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge and general pedagogic knowledge. (Personal communication with CLLWG members).

These theoretical underpinnings are briefly described here.

Sociocultural theories of learning, pre-eminently associated with Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and those who have further developed his ideas, foreground the central role of social interaction and cultural context in shaping how individuals learn and develop. Knowledge and skills are developed through interaction with more knowledgeable others, and language is a crucial tool for learning and mediating social interactions. The languages used must be comprehensible to learners to support their interest in learning and their ability to learn. Images and symbols are other important tools for learning – hence the importance of visual literacy.

From the early 1980s, Krashen's (1982) theoretical work on how 'second' languages are best acquired became influential. While his key claims have been extensively critiqued for being based on assumptions rather than evidence, and for minimising the role of explicit instruction in language learning, one that is still widely accepted is that 'comprehensible input' is centrally important for language acquisition. If input from a teacher, a screen or a printed page is not comprehensible, it is merely 'noise'. While there may not be any direct connection between Krashen's work and that of the increasing number of scholars who advocate the use of learners' full linguistic repertoires for learning (McKinney 2017; Mendelowitz, Ferreira & Dixon 2023), the

TABLE 1: Examples of the Knowledge standards.

Domain	Standard
Core language and literacies proficiency	2. Demonstrate knowledge of basic grammatical concepts that are necessary for language and literacy teaching.
Pedagogic strategies for teaching English	5. Demonstrate knowledge of the importance of oral language in literacy development and of the influence of written language on oral language.
Theories of language acquisition and development	3. Demonstrate knowledge of the theoretical and research-based foundations of home language acquisition and first additional language (second language) learning.

Source: PrimTEd Literacy Working Group 2021, *Knowledge and practice standards for primary teacher education graduates: Language and literacy*, Department of Higher Education and Training, p. 7, Pretoria

TABLE 2: An example of a teacher standard in the Practice section.

Standard	Evidence of achievement
1. Demonstrate the foundational knowledge required to teach a language and literacy curriculum.	1.1 A critical understanding of the approaches taken by the curriculum can be articulated.
	1.2 How the curriculum can be implemented (and adapted when necessary) using available materials and resources, appropriate evidence-based teaching strategies and planned suitable learning activities, is outlined.
	1.3 How the assessment requirements of the curriculum are understood, implemented and adapted is demonstrated.

Source: PrimTEd Literacy Working Group 2021, *Knowledge and practice standards for primary teacher education graduates: Language and literacy*, Department of Higher Education and Training, p. 26, Pretoria

link with comprehensible input is an obvious one. When teachers draw on learners' full range of languages, dialects and varieties (i.e. their linguistic repertoires) to enhance learning, comprehension is more likely to be enabled. As stated by McKinney (2017:28), from a social justice perspective, '[*t*]he recognition of children's full linguistic repertoires as resources for meaning-making will enable them to take up positions as knowers, and as legitimate learners from their entry into formal schooling'. In the 21st century, the ability to read and respond to the visual has become centrally important in an increasingly digital world (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). However, learners need to be more than consumers of the visual; they need to be able to read and view from critical perspectives and to ask questions of the images before them (Ferreira & Newfield 2014).

Scholarly literature, both international and local, is replete with books and articles debating how children learn to read, how they should be taught to read, and how they should read to learn. To some extent, these are debates about emphasis or focus. With reference to reading, the knowledge and practice standards that were eventually compiled aim to encompass providing learners with the building blocks (e.g. knowledge of phonics) and to stimulate their interest in a wide range of resources for engaging with texts, as advocated by proponents of a whole language approach. In addition, learners need to learn to read texts critically to develop potent ways of reading, seeing and acting in the world (Janks 2014).

The concept of teacher knowledge was a further consideration in drafting the standards, with the seminal work of Shulman (1986) underpinning the CLLWG's concept of teacher knowledge. Three of the knowledge domains Shulman describes were central to the group's work: *content knowledge* – knowledge of the subject; *pedagogical content knowledge* – knowledge of ways of making content comprehensible to learners; and *general pedagogical knowledge* – for example, contextual knowledge about learners. Pedagogical content knowledge and to a lesser extent general pedagogical knowledge are central to the conceptualisation and description of knowledge standards for practice.

Research methods and design

The following research questions underpinned the investigation discussed in this article:

- What is the conceptual framing of the PrimTEd standards for the teaching of English language and literacies?
- How do the standards relate to the South African move to translanguaging and mother-tongue-based bilingual education?
- How have teacher educators implemented the standards in their curricula?
- What are the affordances and limitations of the standards in their current form?

An interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach were chosen for examining the conceptualisation, development and enactment of the PrimTEd knowledge and practice standards for languages and literacies within a bounded South African ITE context. We selected an interpretivist paradigm because it is underpinned by a social constructivist epistemology in which reality and meaning are co-constructed through social interaction, and knowledge emerges dialogically between researcher and participants in specific contexts (Merriam 2009). This approach supported the inquiry into how teacher educators interpret, negotiate and enact standards, rather than treating the standards as merely fixed or objective artefacts.

The research design facilitated an in-depth, integrated analysis of multiple data sources, including policy documents, participants' perspectives, and practitioner accounts, thus enabling a nuanced examination of the intersections between policy, theory, and practice (Yin 2018).

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify information-rich participants and data sources aligned with the study's aims (Patton 2015). Participants were selected to reflect two complementary forms of expertise: design expertise (standards developers) and implementation expertise (teacher educators engaged in applying the standards). This approach enabled the study to capture both the intended design and enacted implementation of the standards.

Two complementary data sources were utilised. The first comprised documentary data, including draft PrimTEd standards and associated assessment criteria, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS; Department of Basic Education 2011), the MTbBE initiative (Department of Basic Education 2025), and PrimTEd archival materials such as project newsletters. Initial documentary analysis (Bowen 2009) allowed for mapping the standards to identify the different aspects of language and literacies education which are foregrounded, backgrounded or absent and enabled critical insight into the frameworks and conceptual underpinnings of the standards.

The second data source comprised teacher educator vignettes, used to elicit written, reflective narratives of practice. Two university-based teacher educators were purposively selected for their active engagement with the PrimTEd standards in the design of methodology modules for English as both a FAL and a Home Language.

Vignettes are a recognised qualitative technique for generating situated accounts of meaning-making, enabling participants to articulate interpretations, experiences, and decision-making processes within specific contexts (Barter & Renold 1999). The vignettes operated as an entry point for participants' reflective meaning-making, allowing teacher educators to articulate their interpretations, decisions, and pedagogic responses in relation to the standards. In this study, the vignettes captured how the standards were interpreted and enacted in practice, including their influence

on curriculum design and assessment within ITE methodology modules, as well as the perceived affordances and constraints associated with their use.

The study applied reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019), integrating both deductive and inductive coding. A first layer of analysis involved evaluating the draft standards against current language and teaching scholarship, as well as South African language education policies. This historical overview, along with the literature review, provided insights into what we termed *reflection-on-action* (Schön 1992). The draft standards were then analysed based on vignettes that illustrate the practices of two English teacher educators (*reflection-in-action*). The triangulation of these different layers of analysis provided insights into how the standards connect to contemporary understandings of language and literacies teaching, as well as how they are taken up in practice within English teacher education. Analysis of the documentary materials and practitioner vignettes resulted in the identification of three interrelated themes: conceptual alignment of the standards with theoretical and empirical research on language and literacies education; connections with directions in language and learning in South Africa; and the implementation and enactment of standards in teacher educator practice. Such insights form the basis of our discussion and recommendations, or what can be considered *reflection-for-action* (Farrell 2022).

The teacher educator vignettes

In this section, we ground the standards in practice by sharing vignettes from two teacher educators who have engaged with the draft standards to frame their English language teaching curricula for BEd students in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases.

Teacher Educator A

Teacher Educator A is a lecturer at an urban-based university in the Gauteng province of South Africa. She reports here on how she used the standards to develop her curriculum for second-year and third-year Intermediate Phase teacher education students:

> 'When I stepped into the role of lecturer, I used the standards to create coherence across the two modules that all Intermediate Phase teachers in training at my institution complete. Engaging with the standards encouraged me to think carefully about how the modules could best prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of South African classrooms. For example, the standards highlighted the importance of explicitly considering EFAL methodologies, which led me to emphasise approaches that respond to learners working in additional language contexts.
>
> They also reminded me of the value of continuity across phases, encouraging me to give greater attention to how Foundation Phase pedagogies connect to Intermediate Phase practice. By bringing in specific reading and writing methodology practised in the Foundation Phase, I aimed to help the Intermediate Phase pre-service teachers see these links more clearly.
>
> One of the specific Knowledge and Practice Standards requires that graduate teachers demonstrate knowledge of comprehension strategies to develop comprehension across a range of genres. This standard directly informed my curriculum and assessment design, particularly in relation to the micro lesson assessment. I found that pre-service teachers often defaulted to teaching text types with which they felt most comfortable. To address this, I assigned students different text types at random and required them to select and teach a comprehension strategy appropriate to the assigned genre. While comprehension strategies were already included in the module content, the assessment criterion in the standards placed a stronger emphasis on explicit instruction. I embedded this element into the lesson plan template, requiring students to clearly identify the comprehension strategy being taught and to design a written component aligned with the strategy in the form of a graphic organiser. Through this, students were required to explicitly demonstrate their understanding of how comprehension strategies operate across diverse genres.
>
> In this way, the standards served as more than a policy framework; they became a reflective tool that guided my thinking, extended my practice, and helped me shape the modules in ways that resonate with the competencies English teachers need in diverse, literacy-rich classrooms.' (Teacher Educator A, Intermediate Phase lecturer, Female, October 2025)

Teacher Educator B

Teacher Educator B is a lecturer at the same university. Her vignette illustrates how she used the standards to develop her curriculum for second-year and third-year Foundation Phase teacher education students:

> 'I intentionally designed around three specific PrimTEd standards that best support the disciplinary, pedagogical, and contextual knowledge required of graduate teachers. Drawing explicitly on these standards enabled me to clearly and concretely align my module outcomes, the activities and assessments I designed, and the literacy competencies outlined for South African language and literacy teachers.
>
> First, I grounded my module in PrimTEd Knowledge Standard 3, which requires graduate teachers to "demonstrate knowledge of the theoretical and research-based foundations of home language acquisition and first additional language learning." This standard directly informs my teaching on how HL and FAL knowledge and skills develop across the Foundation Phase, including the differences between natural language acquisition and formal language learning, the implications of learners' home linguistic repertoires, and the ways in which multilingualism shapes instructional choices. I drew on this standard to help student teachers analyse how children's linguistic backgrounds influence vocabulary development, oral proficiency, and reading readiness in both HL and FAL. Enactment of this standard also supported discussions on cross-linguistic influences and the practical decisions teachers make when introducing English as a FAL in contexts where learners have limited exposure to English outside school.
>
> Second, I aligned the structure of literacy teaching in my modules with PrimTEd Knowledge Standards 10–14, which outline the key components of reading and writing, including phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. These standards underpinned the way I teach students to conceptualise the foundations of early reading development and the shift from learning to read

to reading to learn. The standards guided the design of lectures and assessments, including lesson plans, analyses of reading components, and teaching demonstrations. By organising module content around these components, I aimed to enable student teachers to explicitly learn how to plan for, teach, and assess each strand of literacy development in both HL and FAL classrooms, making the link between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice clear and demonstrable.

Third, the module's practical orientation is shaped by PrimTEd Practice Standard 3, which states that graduate teachers must be able to "implement multimodal instructional practice in each of the key components of reading and writing." This standard informs the methodological emphasis I placed on shared reading, guided reading, paired reading, writing, and the integration of multimodal and multilingual resources. It also helped me to guide student teachers in designing lessons that scaffold learners through speaking, listening, reading, writing, and visual literacy activities, particularly for EFAL learners who require explicit, structured support to transition from oral language to literacy.

This practice standard ensures that my module moves beyond theoretical understanding to emphasise evidence-based instructional routines that student teachers can apply confidently in real classrooms.

Together, these three PrimTEd standards provided a robust and discipline-specific framework for the design and delivery of my HL and FAL methodology modules. The standards explicitly show how each lecture theme, activity, and assessment task aligns with nationally endorsed literacy competencies, and ensure that my modules prepare student teachers to meet the knowledge and practice expectations for Foundation Phase English teaching.' (Teacher Educator B, Foundation Phase lecturer, Female, October 2025)

Findings and discussion

In moving from a focus on *reflection-on-action* (background and history) and *reflection-in-action* (teacher educator practice), we now consider how the insights gained might provide some pointers for the future (*reflection-for-action*). We consider this from three perspectives: that of teaching and learning scholarship, current directions in language in education policies in South Africa, and teacher educator practices.

The draft standards from the perspective of language and literacies teaching and learning scholarship

The stated theoretical and empirical research underpinnings of the CLLWG's design of the standards have been presented above. In analysing the standards we looked for evidence that these underpinnings had informed their design.

There is substantial evidence within and across the standards to support the claims made by CLLWG members about the theoretical orientation underpinning these standards. For example, with reference to sociocultural theories of learning introduced by Vygotsky and elaborated on by more recent scholars (e.g., Wertsch 1991), EFAL Standard 2.3 states that graduate teachers must understand 'the cognitive and socio-cultural benefits of using learners' linguistic repertoires' and must be able to use these repertoires to support their learning the additional language in both Foundation and Intermediate Phases.

With reference to cultural context, EFAL Standard 5.6 states that teachers must understand 'that EFAL learning may be positively or negatively influenced by the children's home, community and environmental circumstances' and that they must be able to 'respond appropriately'. With regard to the necessity of language input being comprehensible to learners, as theorised by Krashen (1982), EFAL Standard 5.1 states that teachers must be able to 'identify learners' proficiency level in EFAL and as readers and writers in their home language', implying that their teaching should be responsive to the proficiency levels identified.

The *Knowledge Standards for English Home Language* support the designers' intention to take a 'balanced approach' to the teaching of reading. A total of 23 sub-standards under five umbrella standards (Standards 11, 12, 13, 14 and 21) focus on developing aspects of reading with phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and literature for children bolded in these five standards. We give just two examples to illustrate the contrasting content of these standards:

- Teachers must know and be able to use 'phonics and decoding strategies appropriate to the teaching of reading in a particular language' (HL Knowledge Standard 11.2).
- Teachers must 'display knowledge of literature for children' (HL Knowledge Standard 21) and must 'provide opportunities for learners to listen to and read and respond with enjoyment to a variety of interesting, engaging, social justice informing and conceptually rich texts' (HL Knowledge Standard 21.1).

Home Language Knowledge Standard 17 focuses on visual and critical visual literacy. Teachers must demonstrate knowledge of phase appropriate features of page or screen-based visual texts, of how the relationship of verbal and visual features to texts affects meaning and of strategies to teach learners to become firstly, visually literate and subsequently, critically visually literate.

The development of separate standards for 'teacher knowledge' and 'teacher practice' is indicative of responsiveness to Shulman's position that teachers need to know how to work with their subject or disciplinary knowledge in ways that enable learning in primary school classrooms.

We conclude that the standards enact what was agreed by the CLLWG and those who participated in various consultative processes to constitute the knowledge required of graduating language and literacies teachers.

Inasmuch as the standards reflect their intended conceptual underpinnings, one is cognisant of the fact that these standards were first published in draft form in 2019, and that

since then there have been several important developments in languages and literacies education in South Africa. For example, greater attention is being paid to the notion of translanguaging, in which learners and teachers use their full linguistic repertoires fluidly in classroom talk and writing. We now briefly consider recent scholarship on translanguaging and consider what this might mean for any reconceptualisation or redesign of the standards.

The CAPS, published in 2011, continue to guide classroom teaching and the production of classroom resources, including textbooks and online materials. However, it is evident, particularly in South Africa but also elsewhere, that there is a challenge to the hegemony of English in South African classrooms, strong support for teaching African languages and using these languages for learning across the curriculum, and for utilising teachers' and learners' full linguistic repertoires. While some South African academics in the language teaching and learning field had begun to rethink the hegemonic position of English in South Africa's classrooms decades ago (e.g., Alexander n.d.; Bloch n.d.; eds. Heugh, Sigruhn & Pluddemann 1995; Setati et al. 2002), such rethinking has gained considerable momentum since the process of designing the PrimTEd Standards began in 2016. McKinney (2017) dedicates *Language and Power in Post-Colonial Schooling* to children who are marginalised in schools due to their language resources and to teachers working to address this situation.

McKinney and fellow language teaching researchers have been at the forefront of extending the theorisation of translanguaging beyond its origins in the global north and of testing theory in practice in numerous primary, secondary and tertiary classroom-based research initiatives. A key finding from the analysis of data collected in a range of primary. secondary and tertiary education contexts is that using one's full linguistic repertoire is beneficial for learning languages and for learning across the curriculum (e.g., Hendricks & Xeketwana 2024; Le Roux & Makoe 2024; Makalela 2015; McKinney & Tyler 2024; Mendelowitz et al. 2023; Probyn 2019; Ramadiro 2022; Ritchie 2023).

Important for the *Standards for South African language and literacy graduate teachers* is McKinney and Tyler's (2024:9) observation that while translanguaging can be used to describe any instance of bilingual or multilingual languaging, not all such instances constitute translanguaging for learning. Their list of principles that underpin translanguaging-for learning is derived from extensive classroom-based research and includes the following:

- Positioning teachers and children as linguistically resourceful.
- Enabling teachers and children to use their full linguistic repertoires for teaching and learning in spoken and written modes.
- Enabling children to use their language resources actively to produce spoken and written texts in their own words.
- Enabling children to work collaboratively using their collective language and semiotic resources to learn.
- Scaffolding children's abilities to work with and produce monolingual texts in both minoritised and overvalued languages.
- Enabling children to demonstrate what they are learning and have learned through translingual and bilingual assessments.

While there are references in the draft standards to the importance of learners' linguistic repertoires, there is no explicit reference to translanguaging and its role in learning. We suggest that the principles outlined by McKinney and Tyler (2024) be incorporated in a revised standards document in ways that foreground 'translanguaging for learning' as an aspect of teacher knowledge and of strategies for supporting such learning as an aspect of teachers' pedagogic knowledge.

Similarly, while there is a brief reference to teachers needing to know how to work with 'screen-based texts' (in HL Knowledge Standard 17), there is nothing about teaching learners to use digital media creatively and critically. This is crucial in a context where digital technologies increasingly shape how learners access information, communicate, create knowledge, and participate in society. Beyond simply consuming digital content, learners need opportunities to evaluate the credibility of online information, understand the social and ethical implications of digital engagement, and develop the capacity to produce and share digital content responsibly.

The draft standards from the perspective of directions in current language education policies in South African education

In line with conceptual developments in the fields of language and learning, South African education policy has in recent years increasingly emphasised the role of learners' home languages in education. The Department of Basic Education's MTbBE initiative positions learners' linguistic repertoires as a pedagogical resource for learning across the curriculum, particularly in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases. Mother tongue-based bilingual education promotes the use of home languages alongside English to support conceptual understanding and literacy development, reflecting broader multilingual and translanguaging perspectives in language education (Makalela 2016; McKinney 2017; Probyn 2019). In November 2025, it was reported that the programme had expanded across all nine provinces in South Africa with a total of 11 948 schools implementing the programme.

Recent policy developments indicate that MTbBE has shifted from pilot implementation towards systemic rollout (Department of Basic Education, n.d.). National reports suggest that the programme has been progressively expanded across provinces, with implementation focusing on Grade 4 Mathematics and Natural Science and Technology as initial subjects in the phased introduction of bilingual instruction (Department of Basic Education 2025). In this phase, learners are taught and assessed in their home language alongside English, with the aim of strengthening comprehension and

improving literacy and numeracy outcomes (Department of Basic Education 2025). Recent departmental reporting further indicates that MTbBE has reached implementation in thousands of schools nationally, reflecting a broadening of the programme across all nine provinces (Department of Basic Education 2025).

From a policy trajectory perspective, MTbBE represents a continuation of South Africa's post-1994 commitment to multilingual education, building on earlier interventions aimed at strengthening home language-based learning in the Foundation Phase (Heugh 2015). Rather than treating home languages as a barrier, MTbBE conceptualises them as epistemic resources that can support deeper learning and more equitable access to the curriculum (Makalela 2016). In this regard, the approach aligns with research demonstrating that translanguaging practices can enhance meaning-making and scaffold cognitive development in multilingual classrooms (Probyn 2019).

Translanguaging is expected to be used as a core pedagogical strategy within MTbBE. As indicated above, rather than treating languages as separate systems, translanguaging enables learners to draw on their home language to support comprehension, expression, and conceptual understanding in English or in another language being learned. For example, a teacher might explain a complex idea in a home language, then encourage learners to express their understanding in English, or have learners compare vocabulary and sentence structures across languages.

Although the concept of translanguaging is not specifically referenced in the standards document, it is encouraging to note the extent to which the standards address multilingualism in classrooms and MTbBE. Some examples are paraphrased here:

- **Language Knowledge Standard 4:** Teachers demonstrate an understanding of bi- and multilingualism and the role of standard and non-standard varieties of language in communication and learning.
- **EFAL Standard 1.1 and Standard 1.3:** Teachers demonstrate knowledge of home language acquisition and additional language learning theories and describe the distinctions and inter-relationships between these processes, knowledge essential for scaffolding English learning on a strong home language foundation.
- **EFAL Standard 2.1 and Standard 2.3:** Teachers understand the transfer of linguistic and literacy skills across languages, and the cognitive and socio-cultural benefits of using learners' full linguistic repertoires.
- **EFAL Standard 2.5 and Standard 5.4:** Teachers assist learners in transitioning from home-language instruction to English and use a variety of instructional strategies including repetition, recycling of key vocabulary, and multimodal texts.
- **EFAL Standard 5.1:** Teachers identify learners' proficiency levels in both English and their home language, providing the foundation for targeted bilingual literacy support.

One of the key conceptual points informing the design of the standards was that teachers' and learners' full linguistic repertoires should not only be acknowledged but should be central to language and literacies learning. Interestingly, this design process preceded the recent interest in MTbBE and the promotion of translanguaging. However, if it is the case that 'how we conceptualise language has profound consequences for how we teach language in schooling and for children's access to quality education through language' (McKinney 2017:18), we note that the draft standards compartmentalise or 'fix' languages in 'home' and 'additional' language boxes which may not reflect how teachers and learners use the languages and language varieties they know. On the other hand, if teacher educators treat the EFAL standards as merely an extension of HL content without attention to the distinct demands of 'additional' language teaching and learning, future teachers may be underprepared for the realities of additional language instruction.

A further consideration is whether the future will bring changes in the distinctions between home and first additional language, as currently found in curriculum and language policies. As Mawoyo, Roberts and Pretorius (2026) point out:

> There is a clear PrimTEd expectation that the distinction between home language and first additional language will be reduced over time, as bilingual education practices are incrementally adopted in schooling, as well as in initial teacher education, in line with mother-tongue-based bilingual education. (p. 16)

In the previous sections, we drew on documentary analysis to discuss ways in which the standards link to recent theoretical and policy considerations. In the next section, we draw on the teacher educator vignettes to consider how the standards relate to teacher educator practice.

The draft standards from the perspective of teacher educator practice

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the draft standards are not widely known beyond the community of practice involved in their drafting or subsequently involved in the development of tests to assess student teachers' proficiency within the draft standards. For example, when Teacher Educator A demonstrated at a PrimTEd community of practice meeting that she had drawn on some of the standards and sub-standards to design her BEd English curricula, there were numerous requests for information on where these could be accessed. This suggests a significant role for advocacy, information-sharing, and collaboration on the part of PrimTEd and other role-players, a matter that becomes more important as more organisations become involved in early literacy teaching.

A second point on accessibility relates to the layout of the standards documents. In their current form, the separate sections do not make it clear that the outcomes of each standard and sub-standard listed in the first three sections must be attained by all graduates. Both teacher educators reported that when they first engaged with the sets of standards, they were concerned that those for English 'First

Additional' Language are fewer than for 'Home' Language. They had not initially realised that all new graduates are expected to meet the standards for knowledge and practice in a 'home' language and EFAL, with as many as possible also being able to teach an African language or Afrikaans as a first additional language. To promote take-up, we recommend that a new version of the standards be presented in a clearer, more easily available and accessible format.

A cornerstone principle of the PrimTEd initiative is active lecturer engagement in the development, implementation and evaluation of the standards. The standards are not meant to be rigidly applied but rather to be viewed as 'living documents', open to refinement and adaptation: firstly, because debates on language and literacies teaching are continually evolving, and the standards need to be cognisant of different perspectives as they emerge, and secondly because they are intended as a framework for lecturers to consider what and how they teach, thereby offering a starting point for reflection within a professional community.

Ongoing engagement by lecturers with the standards opens possibilities for both curriculum development and for research. We have already outlined how Teacher Educators A and B used the standards to reshape their English methodology modules. Although the vignettes are limited to two teacher educators at one university, they open a window into further research on interpretation and implementation.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the background and conceptual framing of the PrimTEd English knowledge and practice standards and shown how they are being used by two teacher educators to frame their English methodology modules. Documentary analysis of the standards has revealed close links with recent scholarship on language and literacies teaching, as well as strong connections with the current move towards MTbBE. Gaps in the standards have been highlighted, such as explicit emphasis on translanguaging for learning, and the creative and critical use of digital media. The limited accessibility of the standards to the broader community of lecturers has been identified, suggesting an implementation gap and a need for stronger advocacy and communication as well as for promoting lecturer engagement.

The ongoing issue of language-in-education presents a challenge and an opportunity for the PrimTEd standards. August-Mowers (2025) reminds us that teacher education programmes should align with the languages used for classroom instruction. This implies that MTbBE must be brought into focus in teacher education programmes for the goal to be actualised, as policy itself is not enough to effect change. By situating MTbBE within the existing knowledge and practice standards, pre-service teacher programmes can strengthen their focus on bilingual and multilingual pedagogies. Explicit integration of translanguaging, home language scaffolding, and multilingual literacy strategies will help ensure that teachers are prepared to implement MTbBE effectively, and not as an optional add-on approach, but rather as a central competency in South Africa's linguistically diverse classrooms. As such, we believe the knowledge and practice standards do not need to be fundamentally rethought, as MTbBE represents a far less radical departure than the approaches currently reflected in the existing standards.

From a systems point of view, the PrimTEd standards offer South African teacher education programmes a common framework for outlining what new teacher graduates should know and be able to do. They articulate key assumptions and provide guidelines against which the academic endeavour of reflecting on and improving practice can be made explicit. This, we would argue, contributes to building fairness and transparency, as it provides a shared benchmark for lecturers who are working in diverse and often unequal conditions.

At the same time, the standards are not prescriptive; rather they are intended as a baseline from which to promote engagement and reflection on the part of teacher educators. This intention has the important outcome of building teacher educator capacity within communities of practice. Through diagnostic assessment of student teachers' performance on specific standards, teacher educators are also able to identify where they might want to focus their curricula for their specific students.

While PrimTEd emphasises lecturer engagement, it should be remembered that the process of benchmarking began at the instigation of the Department of Higher Education and Training and that, strictly speaking, standards are only truly standards when recognised by the appropriate authority or authorities. This raises the question of whether, and if so, when and how, draft standards for ITE programmes that focus on knowledge for teachers of English should be finalised and authorised. A further question relates to the acceptability to teacher educators of an authorised version, as mandatory use of such a document may be considered a limitation on teacher educators' current freedom to design curricula within the ambit of their own programmes. Some might even make the point that any move to mandate standards undermines rather than advances lecturer agency. However, we would argue that the standards rather reflect the spirit of 'giving teaching back to education' (Biesta 2017:98), as they provide a conceptually developed and research-informed framework that promotes practical judgment and collective engagement for enhancing teacher education.

Acknowledgements

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Makeeda N. Phekani: Conceptualisation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Luisa E. Tembe: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Hayley H. van der Haar: Writing – original

draft, Writing – review & editing. Maureen Robinson: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Yvonne Reed: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

This study is based on document analysis of draft standards, Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) archival materials, publicly available South African policy documents, and practitioner-generated vignettes that are reproduced in full within the article. The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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