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# From mother tongue to English: A language policy shift at a multilingual township school in Gauteng

**Authors:**
Rockie Sibanda[1]
Lina P. Tshehla[1]

**Affiliations:**
[1]Department of Languages, Cultural Studies and Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**
Rockie Sibanda,
rsibanda@uj.ac.za

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**Background:** Given the lack of research into English language instruction in multilingual contexts, this study explored the switch from mother tongue to English in a South African township school.

**Aim:** This study aims to find out how teachers and parents view the implementation of English as a medium of instruction.

**Setting:** The study was conducted at a multilingual township primary school that implemented an English-medium instruction policy from the foundation phase.

**Methods:** A case study approach was applied to this qualitative research study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four foundation phase teachers and three parents of learners. In addition, observations of the classes of the selected teachers were made, and the data were analysed thematically.

**Results:** The findings suggest that the English medium of instruction poses barriers to effective learning and teaching at the foundation phase. For most township learners, English is not the dominant language in their everyday interactions, and they have limited contact with the language outside the classroom. In addition, most teachers struggle to use English as a medium of instruction.

**Conclusion:** Although some schools have shifted to an English medium policy, the decision appears ill-conceived because its success is insignificant in South Africa, where English is the first additional language for most learners and teachers.

**Contribution:** The findings offer a research framework formulated by integrating past literature, and a theoretical framework for understanding the English medium of instruction where learners are exposed to multiple languages.

**Keywords:** English medium of instruction; Foundation Phase; language; mother tongue; multilingual context; South Africa; township.

## Introduction

South Africa is a linguistically diverse country with 12 official languages, including the latest addition, South African Sign Language (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2024). This diversity is reflected in the classrooms, where learners from different language backgrounds come together (Liebenberg 2024). In multilingual classrooms, learners who cannot utilise their mother tongues or home languages, with which they are most familiar, are less likely to perform to the best of their ability (Owen-Smith 2010). To respond to the language problem in schools, scholars and educationists have recommended mother tongue education (Baker, Wright & Wigglesworth 2020; Cummins 2016; UNESCO 2020), an essential component for quality education, particularly when implemented in the early years of schooling.

The debate about mother tongue education has raged for many years. It is a discourse characterised by mixed views among proponents and critics of mother tongue education (Magocha, Mutasa & Rammala 2019). The debate stems from several factors prevailing in South Africa and other countries, centred on the complexities of improving and integrating indigenous languages into education (Tshotsho 2013). Wolff (2017) argues that the basic philosophy and ideology regarding language in education in Africa is informed by monolingualism policy, which is not so different from education systems promoted by colonialists. Even though the use of multiple languages in

other contexts has been observed throughout Africa, some countries favour single-language policies over inclusive language policies, which recognise different languages spoken in various regions. Single-language policies misrepresent multilingual societies because dominant languages, such as English and Afrikaans, are given precedence over minority languages (eds. McKinney, Makoe & Zavala 2023).

Academic and scholarly works suggest several reasons for mother tongue education in the early years of schooling (Cummins 2016; Phajane 2021; Ramrathan, Grange & Higgs 2017). Cummins (2016) emphasises the critical role of mother tongue education in facilitating cognitive development in children. Children who receive instruction in their mother tongue demonstrate greater proficiency in complex cognitive tasks and literacy than those taught exclusively in a second language (Baker et al. 2020; Hilgart 2024). This underscores the importance of preserving and promoting mother tongues in educational settings. Furthermore, mother tongue education fosters a sense of cultural identity and belonging among children. According to studies by UNESCO (2020), children who are encouraged to learn in their mother tongue build a firm foundation of experience and knowledge in their language from an early age and exhibit higher self-esteem and pride in their cultural heritage. They can likely be more confident in expressing their thoughts when interacting with their classmates and teachers, which can promote a better understanding of the curriculum and improve learner performance (Phajane 2021). Although children need a firm foundation in their mother tongue before developing competence in a second language, the reality is that children in multilingual communities lack mastery of both languages.

## Language in education in South Africa

A highly contentious issue regarding language in education in South Africa is the language policy. Historically, the apartheid government language policy mainly catered to English and Afrikaans speakers and ignored the needs of African language speakers (Madadzhe 2019). Conversely, Afrikaans speakers have always been on a pedestal because the apartheid government had a vested interest in developing Afrikaans. Since Afrikaans became an official language next to English and Dutch, in 1924, active measures have been taken to develop it into a fully-fledged language that could be used for all purposes (Hamans 2021). This was not the case with the indigenous languages that still do not have the necessary registers for academic purposes across all subjects such as maths, science, industry and commerce.

In 1996, the Constitution of South Africa recognised cultural and language diversity as an important national asset (Constitution of South Africa 1996). It culminated in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (Department of Education 2011), a policy framework emphasising the importance of developing multilingual environments at South Africa's education institutions. According to the language policy of the 1996 Education Act and Department of Education (2024), children in Grades R–3 are to be instructed in their home language and learn English as a second language. This implies that non-English-speaking children receive their first 3 years of instruction in their home language and transition to English from Grade 4. However, African language-speaking learners who change from their home language to English instruction struggle with the switch to English-only (Mphasha, Nkuna & Sebeta 2022; Shayne 2020). Factually, only 7% of South African school learners have English as their home language, but 99% have English as Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) from Grade 4 onwards while only 32% have English as LOLT from Grades 1 to 3 (Spaull 2016). Available research shows that more than 80% of children in South Africa learn in a language other than their mother tongue (Tsebe 2021). Conversely, the 3 years of basic English taught as a First Additional Language (FAL) for one to three hours a week, is inadequate preparation for African home language children to be fluent in the LOLT by Grade 4 (Nkosi & Naidoo 2024). To compound the LOLT issue, more and more immigrant children from other parts of Africa in South African schools do not speak English and the local languages (Nkosi & Naidoo 2024; Shayne 2020).

The World Bank's recent report (2023) highlights the limited instructional time for English second language learners in many sub-Saharan African countries, which does not meet the needs of learners expected to transition to English as the LOLT by Grade 4. Considering that for cognitive development in young children, almost 80% of neuronal connections are formed in the first 3 years of life with over 1 million new connections being created every second, it is essential to maximise linguistic exposure and enrichment during this critical period (Center on the Developing Child 2007).

The most recent development regarding mother tongue education is the announcement by the DBE that it is set to introduce mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) from Grade 4 in 2025 (DBE 2024), which education experts have described as a 'transformational' and 'progressive' policy shift (Singh 2024). The proposed rollout of MTbBE is prompted by the 2021 PIRLS results, which have shown that the learners' learning challenges are language-related (DBE 2024). The results of the pilot MTbBE concluded in the Eastern Cape in 2022 showed that MTbBE used beyond Grade 3 is a reliable prototype (Singh 2024). However, for this policy shift to succeed commitment is required, including a huge drive by Higher Education to develop technical terminology in indigenous languages and the government to ensure the availability of the material in indigenous languages.

Although the government is trying to promote indigenous languages in education, research shows that implementing the LiEP is impractical and ambitious because it lacks clear guidelines (Cekiso, Meyiwa & Mashige 2019). Many scholars have argued that teaching in the mother tongue in

South Africa is challenging because of the lack of reading material (Khanyile 2021), insufficient vocabulary and necessary skills to teach in the learner's mother tongue (Foley 2019; Radebe 2015). This leaves teachers and learners no alternative but to use English or Afrikaans for teaching and learning. To counteract this shortcoming, code-switching between these languages and the learners' home languages are common in some schools (Maluleke 2019). Interestingly, many English second language teachers are not fluent in English themselves or the learners' mother tongues (Owen-Smith 2010).

Historically, the hegemony of the English language played a crucial role in the South African Liberation Struggle against apartheid. The Soweto uprising of June 1976 was prompted by the National Party government's decision that Afrikaans should be a compulsory medium of instruction when most township learners wanted to be taught in English or local African languages (Halton 2023; Probyn 2005). The youth of 1976 staked a lot on the issue of language and a future assured by receiving tuition in English (Halton 2023). Decades later, 64% of South African school-goers still want to be taught in English despite isiZulu being the country's most spoken language (StatsSA 2011). This view reflects a long-standing global trend: a preference for English as an international lingua franca and the language of business, science, technology and politics (Halton 2023). Increased hegemony of English in post-apartheid South Africa also puts enormous pressure on parents to choose instruction in English for their children (De Klerk 2000; Essien 2018; Kamwangamalu 2003; Owen-Smith 2010; Setati 2008). The decision is informed by the misconception that using English as the LOLT will result in the child learning good English, a language of economic and social mobility (Owen-Smith 2010).

The dominance of English in a vastly multilingual South African society challenges its inherent language diversity. Interestingly, the South African Institute of Race Relations 2012 Survey, drawing on figures from the DBE, found that 7.6 million learners (around 64%) wish to be taught in English (Davis & Renert 2013). Despite isiZulu being the most spoken language, only one-third of the 3.1 million learners who speak isiZulu at home chose to receive teaching in their home language (Davis & Renert 2013). The dominance of English is common in post-colonial Africa, where the official languages of communication have generally been the languages of the former colonial power, mainly English, French or Portuguese, (Mgqwashu 2006). Even though knowledge of these languages may be minimal to most of the population an increasing number of schools prefer the English medium of instruction from the first grade (Harmse & Evans 2017). The negative consequences of using a language the bulk of the population is not sufficiently fluent in are insurmountable. Preference for English in all spheres of society is a misrepresentation of a multilingual society (eds. McKinney et al. 2023). Therefore, this study aimed to find out how teachers and parents view the implementation of English as a medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase in a multilingual township school.

## Teaching and learning in multilingual contexts

In many countries, English is the primary language of academia, as most academic publications are in English (Negash 2011). Although using indigenous languages in education gained traction in Africa by the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s, the major obstacle was that most countries have many languages, except a few such as Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia (Mukama 2007). The multilingual nature of African societies, including South Africa, makes developing and implementing indigenous language policies complex (Cromarty & Balfour 2019). Using indigenous languages in education has seemingly presented challenges for teachers and learners in various ways. Although the constitution accords every learner with the right to learn in any official language of their choice (South African Constitution 1996), the South African legislation and LiEP do not prescribe which of the 12 official languages should be used in education (DBE 2024).

The *South African Schools Act* (SASA) (1996) and Norms and Standards Regarding Language Policy in Education (Department of Education 2011) give school governing bodies powers to decide on the language of instruction at their discretion, which is a practice most viewed as unfair and exclusionary of some learners. The latest attempt to remove the SGB's sole right to select the language of teaching and learning was passing the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill on 26 October 2023 and signed into law on 09 September 2024. The BELA is set to amend some sections of the SASA of 1996 and the *Employment of Educators Act* of 1998 (EEA) to account for developments in the education landscape since the enactment of the original legislation. It is aimed to address the changing demographics of South African society and create a more inclusive, equitable and efficient basic education system (Bussinesstech 2024). From some quarters, this is seen as not only trying to erode the autonomy of SGBs but also an attempt aimed at reducing the dominance of Afrikaans, perceived as a tool to exclude black learners from affluent Afrikaans medium schools.

Although English is not the first language of most learners, some schools adopt straight English policies from the first grade (Taylor & Coetzee 2013). On the contrary, proponents of mother tongue instruction argue against early exposure to English because it is a language most African language-speaking learners cannot understand. Although English is the LOLT in some township schools, communication in foundation phase classrooms occurs in several languages necessitating code-switching (Cromarty & Balfour 2019). This results in translanguaging where different languages are used for learning and teaching (Chonco 2016). Translanguaging is a dynamic way for multilingual speakers to use language in interactions and switch more fluidly between languages (Gracia & Wei 2014). It is a valuable tool

for recognising and valuing language diversity while enabling learners to use their first language to clarify ideas and concepts of the second language (Bartlett & Garcia 2011; Mazzaferro 2018).

## Language policy shift in education

The link between globalisation and English dominance is evident in projections that by 2050 nearly half of the world's population will be proficient in English (The Triumph of English 2011). The inherent English hegemony in many African countries has resulted in the preference for English for teaching and learning in primary school, a common trend among Anglophone African countries. Coinciding with decolonisation, many countries have initiated language policy shifts, adopting English in education. Unsurprisingly, these policy shifts have occurred against the backdrop of vast empirical evidence supporting the mother tongue as an ideal medium of instruction in the early years of schooling (ed. Babaci-Wilhite 2014; Brock-Utne et al. 2010; Langer 2013; UNESCO 2020). Those in favour of English LOLT argue that it is essential to improve English language proficiency among learners at an early age (Ball 2010). For example, in 2008 Rwanda adopted English as LOLT from the first Grade, while Kinyarwanda and French, the other two official languages, were offered as subjects (Borg 2015). This abrupt language shift was problematic for Rwandan teachers who had to implement it without undergoing the necessary professional development to develop their language proficiencies (Samuelson & Freedman 2010). In 2002, Ghana also underwent a language policy shift, citing the difficulties teachers experienced when teaching in the learner's mother tongue. However, this policy has been inconsistent and oscillates between English-only instruction, in local languages for the first three grades (Rosekrans, Sherris & Komarek 2012). The challenges faced by policymakers in Ghana included, among others, the difficulty of developing a curriculum in the local languages and the scarcity of language teachers and authors to produce material in the regional languages (Ofosu et al. 2015). A similar situation was experienced in Malawi when the mother tongue instruction policy invited a heated debate in academic circles (Chauma, Chimombo & Mtenje 1997; Kathewera 1999; Msonthi 1997) and media (Kazembe 1996; Phiri 2002a, 2002b; Saukani 1996). One of the concerns was inadequate human resources (Chauma et al. 1997; Kamwendo 2008). An educational linguistics survey uncovered (Centre for Language Studies 1999) another problem, namely a lack of teaching and learning materials for the different languages. As a result, in 2014 Malawi introduced a new language policy adopting English as LOLT from the first standard in primary school (Miti 2015). This was a significant change from the 1996 Malawi government directive that learners should be taught in their mother tongue from standards 1 to 4 (Kamwendo 2008). The new policy shift also posed various constraints in Malawi, a multiethnic nation with more than 16 indigenous languages (Republic of Malawi 1998). Notably, English is not dominant in people's daily interactions (Masina 2014).

Although many countries have adopted policies that use English as LOLT to improve the quality of learning and teaching, studies suggest that they present several complexities, affecting younger learners in various ways. Limiting the LOLT to English can result in subtractive bilingualism when the children learn English at the expense of their home language, which gets gradually replaced by English (Greef 2019). In classrooms where subtractive bilingualism is practised, there is little value placed on the learners' first language because communication in a second language is dominant. Consequently, learners experience subtractive bilingualism and lose the linguistic practices they acquired at home (Flores & Rosa 2015).

An alternative approach to subtractive bilingualism is additive bilingualism, which has evolved to refer to a language-in-education strategy that uses two languages of learning and teaching (LOLT) to promote advanced bilingual competency (Pluddeman 2013). Additive bilingualism emphasises literacy in the mother tongue and another language, complementary to the learner's mother tongue, without losing the first language (L1). In this regard, a second language can add to, rather than replace, the first language. According to Cummins (2001), additive bilingualism has the potential to develop while learners continue developing conceptually and academically in their native language and adding a second language to their intellectual toolset.

Several scholars have questioned the relevance of additive and subtractive models (Sefotho & Makalela 2017) because they fall short of addressing the language problem in South Africa for various reasons. Some of the reasons include the vast differences in the socioeconomic and sociolinguistic backgrounds and education contexts of South Africa compared with Canada, where additive and subtractive models are widely used. Learners attending French-Canadian schools are from affluent socioeconomic backgrounds with significant exposure to literacy practices in their mother tongue (Genesee 2004). However, this is not the case in South Africa where most non-English speaking learners who attend schools where English is the LOLT come from poor backgrounds. With limited efforts to formally follow an additive bilingual model, the learners' L1 diminishes. Furthermore, Canadian schools have rich learning practices and cognitive development supported by planned language development resources (Genesee 2004). According to Genesee (2004), Canadian schools have bilingual teachers, trained to teach second language acquisition. This is not the case in South African townships and rural schools where most teachers struggle with English. Furthermore, an additive model in South African contexts is compounded by multilingualism in the everyday lives of township communities.

## Theoretical framework

This study is framed on the second language acquisition theory proposed by Krashen (2013). Within the language

acquisition theory, Krashen and Terrell (1983) distinguish between second language acquisition and language learning, which are different pathways in which learners can associate with a language in their learning environments. According to Krashen (2013), first language and second language acquisition follow a predictable sequence, suggesting that learners can acquire L1 and second language 'English' (L2) through meaningful interactions when they are exposed to the target language in their surroundings. However, second language learning occurs intentionally and consciously through conventions in a formal context where one learns the language rules, and grammar and applies the knowledge gained in real life (Tricomi 1986). Krashen's (2013) theory is significant in how English is taught to non-native speakers. Consequently, for English instruction or implementing an English policy to be successful, learners need to acquire the English language through meaningful interactions and language-rich environments, which is not the case in many contexts, including this study.

# Research methods and design

A qualitative research approach (Creswell & Poth 2018) was adopted to explore the pragmatism of adopting English as LOLT at a township primary school. Within the qualitative research approach, an interpretive paradigm was employed to obtain an insider's perspective of experiences (Leedy & Ormond 2015; Samuels 2019). The study adopted the interpretivist research paradigm (Pham 2018) to understand the participants' experiences and interpretations of mother tongue education in a multilingual context. A case study methodology was employed to provide a detailed analysis of the phenomenon. A multiple case study methodology was employed to provide a detailed analysis of the phenomenon. To explore this phenomenon the following research questions were posed:

1. *How do some teachers and parents perceive English instruction at a multilingual township school?*
2. *What are the teachers' and learners' experiences with English instruction in a multilingual classroom?*

## Setting and context

This study was conducted at a multilingual South African township school in Soweto, a sprawling township west of Johannesburg (SA Tourism 2003; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024). In multilingual townships of South Africa, the education system still reflects the apartheid-era township school system that separated children according to their home languages and kept them spatially divided until high school (Owen-Smith 2010). The sampled school was purposefully chosen because it adopted the English medium of instruction from the foundation phase. The school enrols learners from diverse language backgrounds residing in Soweto including hostel dwellings.[1] Although the learners in the school speak different languages, isiZulu is the most spoken. At the time of this study, the school had changed its official language of instruction from isiZulu to English, leaving isiZulu to be taught as an additional language.

1.Dormitory-like structures built specifically to house African migrant workers from rural areas and other countries who came seeking employment in South Africa's white urban areas (Xulu-Gama 2017).

## Sample and sampling procedure

This study used purposive sampling, a non-probability technique (Creswell 2015), to select the site and the participants. The sample for this study constituted four foundation phase teachers (one male and three female), three learners (two male and one female) and three parents (all female) of the sampled learners. The rationale for including teachers was that they taught the selected Grade 3 classes in English. The rationale for including the three parents was that they were parents of the three sampled learners. Although the learners were part of this study, they were not interviewed but observed in class. The teachers were recruited through the school management. The parents were recruited through invitation letters delivered by the learners. However, migrant parents who were identified for the study declined the invitation to participate in this study because of the prevailing anti-migrant sentiments in the townships. Several studies have documented widespread xenophobic harassment of African foreign nationals and attacks by locals including law-enforcement officials (Crush & Tawonzera 2014; Gordon 2020; Misago & Landau 2022; Vanyoro 2019).

## Data collection

Classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data for this study. The first researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers and parents using their preferred language. Approximately 10 questions were posed to the teachers during the interviews. The interview protocol used for teachers was as follows: questions 1–3, to find out about the learner diversity at the school; questions 4–6, to find out about the languages used for instruction in the Grade 3 classroom; questions 7–8, to find out about English instruction and policy changes and questions 9–10, to find out about challenges of teaching in diverse settings. The interview protocol used for parents was as follows: questions 1–3, to find out about languages used at home, questions 4–5, to find out about challenges the learners encounter when learning at home, and questions 6–8, to find out about parental involvement in homework activities. Classroom observations were made to corroborate interview data. Using two different methods provided a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study (Patton 1999). For example, the teachers did not only narrate the challenges and benefits of using the home language.

Still, they were observed in their classrooms, to uncover their experiences in language teaching. The interviews with the teachers and the parents were conducted on the school premises after school hours. They were in English and isiZulu, the participants' preferred languages. The parents were interviewed on the school premises because they resided at the hostel, which was perceived unsafe for people

who do not reside there. The interview data were transcribed and translated by the first researcher. The second researcher ensured the accuracy of the translation.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2012). The process followed the steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2021). The first step was the transcription of the interview recordings and lesson recordings. The transcribed data were then translated into English by the second researcher. In the second step, both researchers read the translated transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data. After data familiarisation, the third step of reflective thematic analysis was the generation of initial codes (Braun & Clarke 2021). In this phase, we identified several codes to label the concepts from the data sets. Thematic coding involves recording or identifying parts of texts linked by a common theme or idea, allowing indexing of the texts into categories and establishing a framework of thematic ideas about it (Gibbs 2014). For example, codes such as the language of learning and teaching, parental support, reading proficiency, learning material, medium of instruction and challenges in learning and teaching were identified from the data set. We dealt with the coding and theme differences in determining the relative meaning. The fourth step involved the generation of initial themes by highlighting common and divergent patterns from the grouped codes. For example, codes such as 'educational support' and 'learning material' were merged to form the theme 'reading proficiency and parental support' because of similarities in the codes. Three themes were generated from the data: (1) Language inclusion and exclusion in the classroom; (2) reading proficiency and parental involvement and (3) the switch from the mother tongue to English medium of instruction. After reviewing the themes, a coherent narrative of the findings was provided using quotes and excerpts to further illustrate the themes (Braun & Clarke 2021).

## Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct this study was granted by The Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the authors' institution (Protocol: REC-01-167-2022). Informed consent was obtained from the teachers, parents and the school. The aim of the study was explained using the participants' preferred language and informed consent was obtained from all the participants. The school principal, alongside the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) Research Unit (Protocol: REC-01-167-2022), provided permission for the research to be conducted at the selected school. The children gave assent, and the parents consented to their children being observed while learning. The three parents who took part in the study gave specific consent to participate in the semi-structured interviews and have the proceedings recorded. The confidentiality of participants was maintained by using pseudonyms in the reporting and writing of this article.

# Results

## Language inclusion and exclusion in the classroom

Our study established that before Wozani Nonke Primary School (pseudonym) adopted English as the LOLT in 2022, isiZulu was the LOLT and taught as a home language. The teachers reported that teaching in isiZulu was difficult in the foundation phase. Although the study did not establish the position of the learners, the parents in this study expressed a preference for isiZulu LOLT. This suggests that the policy shift to English was mainly done to accommodate the teachers' views and alleged difficulties of teaching in isiZulu.

Although the teachers argued that adopting English as LOLT was meant to address the language problems, the decision appears to have overlooked the cultural and multilingual diversity of the learners. Our study found that the practice of teaching and learning did not reflect the linguistic diversity of learners in the school. During classroom observations, it was evident that although English was the official LOLT in the school, the teachers relied on code-switching to clarify key concepts to learners. IsiZulu was used widely when code-switching because it is most spoken in the community and the school. However, this code-switching practice excluded migrants and other learners whose first language was not isiZulu. This practice appeared to neglect the inherent linguistic diversity and language pluralism in the school, as Ms Zulu noticed:

> '*Abanye bavela eMozambique, eZimbabwe, eNigeria, and abanye bavela eKapa bakhuluma isiXhosa, abanye bavela eKZN, bakhuluma isiZulu*. [Some are from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, and others are from the Cape, and they speak isiXhosa. Some are from KZN, and they speak isiZulu].' (Female, Teacher, Diploma in Foundation Phase)

Although Ms Zulu's view demonstrates some insight regarding language diversity at the school, she did not seem to utilise this knowledge in her teaching practises, which was anchored on English and isiZulu to a large extent. Therefore, it looks like neither isiZulu nor English LOLT could solve the language complexity at the school because of the multilingual nature of the school and the teachers' failure to recognise this context. The lack of a functional multilingual pedagogical approach is an overarching problem in South African classrooms because language resources brought by children are seen as stumbling blocks to the children's educational success and are not celebrated or expanded (Sibanda 2017).

In addition to language diversity, the study found that isiZulu dialectal variance was problematic when used. Dialectical differences in multilingual contexts can impede mother tongue education when teachers and learners speak different dialects. For example, Ms Zulu ostracised, one of her learners, Andile, for speaking the standard isiZulu dialect from KwaZulu-Natal because the teacher and other learners spoke the non-standard township dialect of isiZulu. Ms Zulu viewed Andile as a misfit because of his dialect

differed from that of the learners in his class. As a result of the unique dialect that he spoke, Andile was derogatorily named '*mafikizolo*' [a new arrival], a term with a negative connotation associated with backwardness (Sibanda 2019). The teacher and learners expected Andile to adopt the 'informal' township Zulu to fit in. Instead of compelling Andile to change his dialect, Ms Zulu should have tapped his linguistic ability and used it as a benchmark for other learners to learn standard Zulu. For example, Sibanda's (2019) study found that a teacher used a learner in a situation like Andile's to encourage her peers to emulate her standard Zulu proficiency.

In this study, isiZulu L1-speaking learners were not the only ones with language-related problems. Some learners whose L1 was neither English nor isiZulu faced a worse predicament because they were compelled to learn isiZulu and English, which was the primary LOLT at the school and foreign to them. For example, Lwati, a Swati first language-speaking learner who seemed to perform poorly in class could not comprehend isiZulu and English. In addition, he could not interact well with isiZulu in class and reading was an in-depth challenge for him. However, the ability of learners to read or write a language they cannot speak properly differs according to context. For example, Sitsha's (2018) study found that some learners could not write but read English. The PIRLS (2021) report has shown that just because learners can read, it does not imply that they can necessarily read for meaning. The South African portion of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021 found that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners struggle to read for comprehension at age 10 (Mullis et al. 2023).

## Reading proficiency and parental involvement

Our study found reading a significant problem in the foundation phase. The learners encountered several challenges with reading English, and it also seemed that the teachers lacked the skill to teach reading. However, the teachers blamed the parents for the learners' inability to read fluently, alleging that 'Learners could read fluently if their parents helped them after school and practised reading with their children regularly' (Interview with Ms Skhalo, 2023). This is consistent with a study by Logan et al. (2019), which revealed that reading to children regularly can significantly improve their vocabulary. However, in South Africa, 43% of households do not have access to books (Van Staden & Roux 2021), although it is common for teachers to blame parents for not teaching children to read (Sibanda 2019). To address the problem of reading deficiency, Ms Skhalo, reported identifying learners who struggled the most with reading and employed reading intervention every morning before class. This demonstrates a lack of priority for teaching reading, which was discretely administered. Dispelling the teachers' allegation of lack of parental involvement, our study found that a parent such as Ms Khumalo reported exposing her child (Sphokuhle) to reading English books from an early age.

As the children's first learning experiences are tied to their home environment, the parents are important in creating a favourable learning environment for their children (Mullis et al. 2021). Although the parents in our study reported being involved in assisting their children, it cannot be concluded that all parents in the school were involved in their children's education. Studies have shown that in most township communities several factors hinder parents from getting involved in their children's education. Researchers suggest that factors such as poverty, unemployment, single-parenting and a lack of nurturing family structures can impede parental involvement (Jacobs 2023, 2024; Mbhiza & Nkambule 2023; Munje & Mncube 2018), especially among low-income communities (Lemmer 2011; Mtiya & Kariyana 2023). Furthermore, it is important to observe that parents will not offer educational support to their children alike (Manilal & Jairam 2023). While parents such as Ms Khumalo exposed their children to reading some parents such as Ms Mthembu promoted language development by using isiZulu when helping their children with homework. Mrs Mthembu explained that:

> '*Kodwa sikhuluma ngesiZulu uma ngimsiza ngomsebenzi wakhe wasekhaya. Phela ngifuna aqonde umsebenzi anikezwe wona ukuthi awenze kahle. Emsebenzini anikezwe wona wesiNgisi ngiye ngisebenzise nolimi lwesiZulu ngoba ngifuna awenze kahle.* [But we speak isiZulu when I help him with his homework, I want him to understand the task he is given, so that he does it well. For his English homework I also use isiZulu because I want him to do it well].' (Female, Feeding scheme cooker, Primary school)

## The switch from mother tongue to English language of teaching and learning

One of the key themes emerging from the findings is the reason for the language policy shift at Wozani Nonke Primary School. Mr Mdaniso, the Foundation Phase HOD at the school argued that the switch from isiZulu to English was precipitated by the observation that isiZulu instruction presented several barriers to learning and teaching:

> 'Using IsiZulu, which is their mother tongue, was difficult especially when teaching subjects which had no Zulu words. For example, in Mathematics we had struggles and challenges with words such as fractions, denominators, and numerators which cannot easily be translated into Zulu.' (Male, Teacher, Honours in Mathematics)

Many South African teachers, like Mr Mdaniso, have problems teaching in isiZulu, although research shows that using the mother tongue can benefit learners in all subjects (Khanyile 2021; Malindi, Ndebele & Gobingca 2023). The problem is associated with the complexities of using standard isiZulu for learning and teaching as Ms Skhalo succinctly observes:

> '*IsiZulu saseNatal asifani nesiZulu saseGoli. IsiZulu saseNatal. Sijiyile kakhulu. Kuzomele uchaze uma ufundisa ngokubhala [ikati ne cat], Ngeke ngazi ukuthi isingisi noma IsiZulu abasiphambanisayo.* [The KwaZulu-Natal Zulu is different from the Johannesburg Zulu. It is too complicated. You've to explain in writing when you teach. I wouldn't know if it's Zulu or English they are making errors in].' (Female, Teacher, Bachelor of Education in the Foundation Phase)

From our perspective, it can be deduced that the language policy switch was meant to counteract the teachers' isiZulu deficiency more than the learners' needs. However, some teachers in this study had strong reservations about English-medium instruction, even though it was the official language of instruction of the school. They maintained that teaching in isiZulu could benefit the learners because it is the language they are most exposed to in everyday interactions. For example, Ms Zulu argued:

> '*Baya-bhenefitha ngokuzi-expressa fluently because yi-mother tongue yabo from home especially Zulu-speaking learners … abanye they write very well isiZulu sabo, even when besenza i-creative writing babhala kahle*. [They benefit from expressing themselves fluently in their mother tongue, especially Zulu-speaking learners .. some write isiZulu very well and even in creative writing they can write well].' (Female, Teacher, Diploma in Foundation Phase)

According to Ms Zulu, learning in one's mother tongue can aid self-expression and make writing easier, particularly for Zulu-speaking learners. This view aligns with Letsie's (2002) poignant argument that using the mother tongue can:

> [*P*]romote better understanding between the home and the school. [*because*] Most educationists have taken it as axiomatic that children benefit most – emotionally and cognitively – if instruction in the early stages of primary education is conducted in the mother tongue. (p. 196)

In addition, Ms Mbatha, another teacher, revealed that teaching in English was a huge problem because '*kunzima nokuthi bayikhulume nokuthi bazibhalele amagama*' [it is difficult for them to speak it and write words]. Ms Mbatha's remarks show her uncompromising rigidity towards teaching in a mother tongue rather than English. She is adamant that the learners struggle with learning in English and concedes that it is difficult because '*abanye* [some] cannot even write in English'. Barriers to learning in English can also be fostered by the reality that learners are often placed in educational settings where they are obligated to learn a language which they do not usually use at home and are not competent to learn effectively (Govender 2015).

Although Mr Mdaniso and Ms Skhalo claimed to witness great benefits with the language policy shift, Ms Mthembu, a parent in this study lamented that '*Esingisini ngibonile ukuthi umntwana usahluleka ngoba kokunye akakakwazi ukuzenzela khona uma efunda eyedwa*' [In English, I have noticed that my child still struggles because he [*sic*] cannot do some things when he [*sic*] learns on his own]. Because of the challenge that Ms Mthembu identified in her child, she was convinced that she could not learn English. She expressed some reservations about her child's appreciation of English '*Okwamanje angiboni kahle ukuthi uyasijabulela isiNgisi ngoba usasemcane*' [At the moment, I am not convinced that he is happy with English because he is still young]. For some learners, the transition from the mother tongue to English instruction has become seamless. Even though Mr Mdaniso was confident that English was beneficial for teaching, others found it problematic; available research provides evidence of the benefits of the mother tongue to learning and teaching, which discredits his views and those of other teachers in this study. For example, Duru (2022) maintains that learning in one's mother tongue can benefit the child's cognitive development and intellectual improvement.

## Discussion

This study explored teachers' and parents' views of English instruction in a multilingual township school. A central narrative of the study's findings is the language policy shift from mother tongue to English instruction in the foundation phase. However, findings suggest that the adopted policy presented more challenges than benefits. One of the problems observed in the study was overlooking the cultural and linguistic diversity of learners, which resulted in teaching practices that did not reflect the diversity of the learners. Because of the diversity of the learners, this study suggests a need for teaching strategies such as code-switching, which was observed to feature prominently during lessons and seemed to aid a better understanding of the subject matter. However, code-switching was limited to predominantly isiZulu and English could not benefit other indigenous languages and migrant learners in the study.

The parents' view of the language of instruction shows less preference for English because children are more familiar with their mother tongues. Therefore, learning in English presents more challenges than learning in their mother tongue. As demonstrated in the literature, school language policies have been problematic in various contexts, including the countries that adopted English language instruction for reasons, which significantly vary from those suggested by the teachers in this study. In most cases, the preference for English as LOLT is influenced by parents' views and society's expectations (Bagwasi & Costley 2022). Therefore, schools are pressured to introduce English in the early grades because, as some studies show, parents worry that their children will be left behind and not gain English competence if taught in their mother tongue (Kioko et al. 2014). However, this was not the case in our study because the parents were adamant that their children learn better in isiZulu than in English.

Besides the reasons suggested for adopting English as LOLT at the school in this study, it is difficult to determine if English as LOLT is more problematic than mother tongue instruction. The main cause of the problem seems to be the disharmony between policies and teaching practices, which do not reflect the reality of the complexities of multilingual educational contexts. This is also evident in other countries that have adopted policies favouring English as LOLT; practices in their classrooms did not reflect the successful implementation of the pro-English policy because of the complexities of the contexts in which these policies were implemented. Bagwasi and Costely (2022) poignantly observe that regardless of the Policy stipulation, the language practices of teachers and

learners do not reflect the fixed and rigid ways in which they are framed in the language policy.

Regardless of what leads to a shift in language policy, the learner's mother tongue has been proven to be a foundation for learning. Extensive research demonstrates that it can allow learners to interact freely and confidently in a language with which they are familiar. Because of the proven benefits of using the mother tongue (Jegede 2011), translanguaging practices were observed in classrooms where English and isiZulu were, for example, mixed to aid meaning (Garcia & Wei 2014). It is important to notice that the translanguaging employed by teachers in this study did not reflect Makalela's (2016) conception of *ubuntu* translanguaging, accommodating learners' language diversity.

The educational context in this study reflects subtractive bilingualism (Cummins 2001) because learners were taught through English at the expense of their L1. Further evidence from this study shows that the school aimed to promote competence in one language, English, which is not the learners' mother tongue. Although the learners speak different mother tongues, our findings suggest that using their languages for pedagogical purposes is not encouraged in their classrooms. As a result, a need for multilingual teaching practices such as translanguaging is suggested (Reilly 2019). Translanguaging is an approach to learning recognising and acknowledging the complex language situation in South Africa's classrooms. This approach views multilingualism as an essential tool for learning instead of using one language for learning. The diversity of languages that learners bring to the school can be used as tools to unlock various ways of learning and communicating in diverse settings.

### Limitations and implications

This study may have provided significant insight into language use and multilingualism in education. However, there are several limitations. Firstly, it cannot be concluded that the findings of this study about multilingualism resemble all township primary schools because mother tongue instruction is approached differently in different contexts. Mother tongue instruction cannot be generalised or applied to all township primary schools because every township has unique sociolinguistic dynamics. Secondly, the study did not explore the sociolinguistic environments of all learners in the school but was limited to only three learners who participated in this study. Lastly, the parents interviewed in this study did not corroborate the teachers' claim that consent to use English as LOLT in 2022 was 'informed' because they expressed ignorance of the development. Because the SGB was not part of this study, it could also not corroborate the claim that the parents were consulted about the decision to change the language of instruction. It is also questionable if the parents in this study could make an informed decision regarding choosing the language of instruction, considering they were neither educationists nor language specialists. The small sample size was also a problem, even for a case study.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This study explored the adoption of English as LOLT at a multilingual township primary school in Soweto. While this policy was adopted in 2022 to improve teaching and learning data from this study show it did not yield the desired results such as increased learner participation in English classes. The study results show that teaching in English yielded more challenges than benefits. Evidence from this study suggests that teachers lack the resources, innovation and skills to teach in multilingual classrooms. This is demonstrated in their systematic failure to recognise and exploit the rich linguistic capital that learners bring to the learning experience. The learners are compelled to learn an unfamiliar second language, which is not their home language. Although the teachers maintain that indigenous languages impede learning and teaching, data from the study suggest a lack of competence by the teachers in Indigenous languages, not the learners. It can be argued that the language practices in this study are exclusionary to some learners. Therefore, the study calls for teachers in multilingual contexts, like in this study, to be better equipped to deal with the complexities of multilingual and multicultural classes. The study concludes with a recommendation to adopt well-informed inclusive policies considering the sociolinguistic context of the learners. It calls for further research in the fields of language in education in multilingual classrooms.

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### Authors' contributions

L.P.T. as the primary researcher, conducted the data collection and analysis as well as compilation of the article. R.S., as the research supervisor, conceptualised the study, provided guidance on data collection and analysis, and also contributed to the writing of the article. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final articles.

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### Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not openly available because of sensitivity and confidentiality but can be available from the corresponding author, R.S. upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

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