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Language Barriers Affecting Grade 4 Learners' Academic Progress

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Abstract. The present study investigated how language barriers impede academic achievement in English First Additional Language (EFAL) during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4. These barriers hinder teaching and learning in the Grade 4 classroom, resulting in poor academic performance. Consequently, this study addressed language barriers through targeted strategies, including early intervention programmes, teacher training, and bilingual education models. The research was guided by the Simple View of Reading Framework, which examined foundational literacy components such as phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. A qualitative case study design was employed, with data collected from 12 participants. Findings revealed that learners often enter Grade 4 with underdeveloped EFAL skills, exacerbated by limited exposure to English in the Foundation Phase and a sudden transition to English-only instruction. Teachers reported difficulties in bridging the linguistic gap, citing issues such as inadequate training, a lack of learner support materials, and misalignment between curriculum expectations and learner readiness. It was concluded that the language of teaching and learning in Grade 3 significantly impacts Grade 4 performance. The study recommends training, workshops, and policy refinement.

Keywords: academic achievement; English; First Additional Language; language barriers; transition

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1. Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' academic success, particularly in multilingual contexts such as South Africa (Prinsloo-Marcus & Campbell, 2022). In South Africa, multilingualism in education is increasingly recognised as a critical approach, as learners are exposed to multiple languages within the classroom environment. Learners in South African public schools are instructed in their mother tongue from Grades 1 to 3 (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2016). Various studies indicate that the utilisation of the mother tongue during the

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foundation phase adversely affects the reading comprehension of Grade 4 learners (Lepheana, 2025). Research on children's development and early childhood education has demonstrated that young children possess distinct learning styles that correspond with their developmental stages (Lersil et al., 2024). Consequently, educators in both the foundation phase and intermediate phase should address the gap and mitigate the language barriers that contribute to suboptimal academic performance.

The transition of language in South African schools is perceived as a barrier in Grade 4 classrooms, resulting in poor academic outcomes for these learners (Roux et al., 2023). The South African Department of Education (2005) notes that language barriers arise when learners are required to learn and communicate in a language that is not spoken at home and in which they lack sufficient proficiency. The study conducted by Dobbs and Leider (2025) articulated that teachers' beliefs regarding standard English influence the methods employed in teaching and assessing language. Furthermore, Dobbs and Leider (2025) emphasised that educators often concentrate on standard language forms while neglecting learners' home languages, thereby missing opportunities to leverage these languages to enhance teaching and learning. The reliance on standard language in Grade 4 has been found to impede learners' academic progress by restricting access to meaning-making and comprehension of content.

The present study investigated *"how language barriers affect Grade 4 learners' academic progress."* It therefore examined how teachers' beliefs and classroom practices influence the transition. This study identified strategies that can be employed to bridge the gap between learners' home languages and the language of instruction, thereby enhancing reading comprehension and overall academic performance. The findings of this study are significant for English First Additional Language and English Second Language teachers, as they elucidate how language can impact learners' academic performance. Moreover, the study provides insights into potential teaching approaches that accommodate all learners within the classroom.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Policy in South Africa

In the Foundation Phase, learners in South Africa begin with a solid grounding in their home language, which they use for daily communication and educational activities (Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2022). This home language is intricately linked to their cultural identity and social interactions (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). However, from Grade 4 onwards, English becomes the primary language of instruction.

As learners progress from Grade 3 to Grade 4, they encounter several transitions: adapting to a new environment, shifting languages, and moving from being taught by a single teacher to engaging with multiple educators (DBE, 2016). This abrupt transition poses challenges, particularly as learners may not have developed adequate proficiency in English during the early grades (Smith, 2025). Zhang (2023) asserts that teachers can significantly influence learners' literacy

development by enhancing their instructional methods and building upon learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Fitrianto (2024) posits that language transition entails moving from the utilisation of a single language for teaching and learning to the integration of multiple languages interchangeably, exemplified by the transition from Sepedi to English. Mizumoto and Eguchi (2023) elucidate that language is fundamental to communication, idea formation, and the organisation of thoughts. Fitrianto (2024) further emphasises that acquiring a language is essential for learners to interpret and understand their surroundings. The Department of Basic Education (2019) indicates that transitioning from one language to another, such as from Sepedi to English, can adversely affect student performance. Consequently, learners moving from Grade 3 to Grade 4 face numerous challenges, including adapting to a new environment, switching languages, and transitioning from a single teacher to multiple teachers (DBE, 2016). Smith (2025) observes that this sudden shift can be particularly difficult for learners who may not yet have established a strong proficiency in English during their formative education.

2.2 Language Transition Challenges

A conceptual overview of language transition involves understanding how individuals or groups shift from using one language to another. This process can be influenced by various factors, including social, cognitive, and educational elements (Wei, 2023). In the context of education, researchers use the term "transitioning" to describe a sudden shift from using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction to using a second language (English). In this study, transitioning is defined as the shift from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Due to this abrupt change, learners advance to the next grade with a limited vocabulary, making it challenging to meet the academic demands of higher grades.

Jablonka, Schwaller, Ortega-Guerrero, and Smit (2024) found that learners struggle with transition due to moving from familiar activities to often uncomfortable contexts. Jablonka et al. (2024) also mention that initial experiences can lead to feelings of loneliness, shock, and fear, making adaptation to transitions particularly challenging for learners. Consequently, the transition to English increases the cognitive load on learners, who must now grasp new concepts in a language they are still acquiring (Brown & Lee, 2025). The DBE states that another challenge for these learners is the increase in workload (DBE, 2016).

In the Foundation Phase, learners are accustomed to four subjects (Home Language, Mathematics, Life Skills, and First Additional Language). In the Intermediate Phase, however, learners transition to six subjects, including Natural Sciences, Technology, and Social Science (which is further divided into History and Geography), alongside the existing subjects. Additionally, learners must adapt to a new linguistic and cultural environment within the classroom, which can be overwhelming. The increased number of subjects and teachers adds further strain to the learners. In addition to the challenges of transition, learners are expected to use a foreign language to comprehend the content taught in these additional subjects.

2.3 Transition Challenges

Language transition in education presents numerous challenges for both learners and teachers. For learners, one of the main difficulties is achieving proficiency in the new language, which can significantly affect their academic performance (Smith, 2025). Another challenge for learners is that cognitive load impacts their learning during the transition phase. According to Mayer (2009), the learning process is impeded when working memory is overloaded with excessive information, as learners are required to simultaneously process new content alongside an unfamiliar language. Cummins (2000) articulated that learners may appear conversationally fluent in English (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills, BICS) while struggling with the academic language required for learning (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, CALP).

Some learners can communicate in English but still struggle to comprehend grade 4 texts. Additionally, adapting to the cultural context associated with the new language can be challenging, often leading to feelings of isolation or frustration (Wills, 2022). Confidence issues also arise, as learners may feel self-conscious about making mistakes, which can hinder their participation in class (Smith, 2025). Furthermore, limited access to learning materials and opportunities to practise the new language outside the classroom can slow their progress (Brown & Lee, 2025).

Teachers, on the other hand, face their own set of challenges. Many may not have adequate training to teach effectively in a new language, especially if they are also transitioning (Williams, 2022). Resource constraints, such as a lack of appropriate teaching materials, can further complicate the teaching process (Brown & Lee, 2025). Engaging and motivating learners who are struggling with a new language is another significant challenge (Smith, 2025). Additionally, accurately assessing learners' progress can be difficult when language proficiency varies widely among students (Williams, 2022).

2.4 Academic Impact of Language Barriers

2.4.1 *Language Barriers in Teaching and Learning*

In the diverse and multilingual environment of the Tshwane West District, language barriers present significant challenges to both teaching and learning (Sholihah et al., 2024). These barriers severely affect learners who struggle to comprehend lessons, instructions, and educational materials due to insufficient proficiency in the language of instruction. As Cummins (2000) asserts, this may result in decreased academic performance and disengagement from the learning process.

Furthermore, standardised tests and assessments often do not accurately reflect the knowledge and abilities of learners who are still acquiring proficiency in the language of instruction. This issue is particularly salient in township schools within the Tshwane West District, where numerous learners are transitioning from instruction in their home language to English (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). The language barrier not only impedes learners' comprehension and participation but also prevents standardised assessments from providing an accurate representation of their academic capabilities.

Given these challenges, it is imperative to address language barriers through targeted strategies such as early intervention programmes, teacher training, and bilingual education models. By implementing these measures, educational outcomes in multilingual and diverse settings such as Tshwane West District could be significantly enhanced, ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed academically and fully engage in the learning process. Teachers encounter difficulties in conveying complex concepts and delivering effective instruction when learners are not proficient in the language used, which leads to frustration and a reduction in teaching efficacy (Gándara, 2010). This issue is particularly pertinent to the research topic, as numerous educators in Gauteng's township schools, including those in the Tshwane West District, face analogous challenges when transitioning from teaching in a home language to teaching in English.

According to PIRLS 2021, 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are unable to read with comprehension (Hillman et al., 2023). The PIRLS study indicates that South African learners' ability to read for meaning is below standard by age 10. In 2016, the PIRLS results indicated that 78% of South African learners were unable to read with comprehension (Howie et al., 2017). With a score of 288, South Africa performed significantly below the PIRLS benchmark of 600. One contributing factor to this poor performance may be the introduction of English as the language of instruction in Grade 4. This transition poses a challenge, as learners are accustomed to being taught in their mother tongue from Grades 1 to 3 (Roessingh, Nordstokke, & Mir-Orefice, 2025). The shift from mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase to English in Grade 4 creates a language barrier and psychological strain. Lee et al. (2021) support the notion that reading engagement is a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, behavioural, and emotional involvement in reading activities, which learners in higher grades should have developed in the early grades.

However, various studies demonstrate that the integration of technology when teaching EFAL can improve learners' academic performance. Belkhir-Benmostefa (2020) investigated the awareness of Algerian EFL teachers and learners regarding the integration of smartphones in EFL classrooms. The results revealed that learning English with a smartphone motivates students and exposes them to extended vocabulary and access to information at any time and place (Belkhir-Benmostefa, 2020). Mncwango and Makhathini (2021) state that in Grade 4 classrooms, the language barrier is considered problematic as learners struggle to comprehend lessons delivered in English, their second language.

The South African Department of Education (2005) asserted that language barriers often arise when learners are required to communicate and learn in a language that is not commonly used at home and in which they lack proficiency. The present study, therefore, highlights that literacy development could be enhanced by integrating multilingual pedagogies, drawing on learners' home languages as cognitive and linguistic resources for learning. Furthermore, the current study by Cummins (2000) emphasises that the transfer of skills from the first language to

the second language can support reading comprehension and overall literacy development.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: The Simple View of Reading (SVR)

The present study was guided by the SVR theory proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986). According to the SVR, a competent reader must be able to decode words using sound-symbol relationships and understand spoken language (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). The researcher chose the SVR framework because it provides a robust understanding of literacy development skills and how gaps during the transition phase between Grades 3 and 4 could affect learners' academic performance, particularly in EFAL contexts.

The first component of the framework, decoding, refers to learners' ability to translate written symbols into their corresponding spoken forms through knowledge of phonics, phonological awareness, and fluency (Hoover & Tunmer, 2020). Learners are struggling to decode words in English. The Curriculum Policy Statement states that learners in the Foundation Phase should develop decoding skills as a foundation for building more complex literacy. However, Grade 3 learners in most township schools transition into Grade 4 with underdeveloped phonics and poor reading fluency. Consequently, learners in Tshwane West struggle with decoding, which leads to poor comprehension.

Similar to the SVR, which indicates that weak decoding limits meaning-making, the present study found that poor decoding and language comprehension in township schools, where English is rarely spoken outside the classroom, significantly affect Grade 4 learners' academic performance. In the area where the study is conducted, learners use their home language for communication both at home and at school. Hence, the present study found that Grade 4 learners struggle to engage with texts that require fluent and accurate reading (Mutema & Pretorius, 2024).

In terms of the Language Comprehension Component of the framework, learners should be able to extract and construct meaning from linguistic input, relying on vocabulary knowledge, syntactic understanding, listening comprehension, and background knowledge (Roessingh et al., 2025). Due to a lack of exposure in Grade 3 and at home, learners enter the Grade 4 classroom with underdeveloped comprehension skills, which will affect their academic performance. The SVR theory will therefore be relevant to the study, as it will assist the researcher in identifying possible decoding and language comprehension activities that could facilitate a smooth transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4.

3. Methodology

The present study employed a multiple case study approach with a qualitative focus to investigate the language barriers affecting the academic progress of Grade 4 learners in South Africa.

3.1 Research Paradigm

According to Pretorius (2024), a research paradigm consists of shared beliefs and agreements among scientists regarding the understanding and resolution of problems. The beliefs and agreements investigated in this study pertain to the issues caused by the language barrier, which contribute to poor performance in rural schools in the Tshwane West District. Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) concluded that qualitative methods are the most appropriate means for researchers to gain profound insights within a specific context.

3.2 Research Approach and Research Design

To understand a subjective human experience or a phenomenon of interest through the minds and eyes of participants, the present study adopted a qualitative research approach within a case study design (Hirose & Creswell, 2022). Yin (2018) explained that a multiple-case study involves observing various individual cases to investigate a particular phenomenon, group, or overall situation. Hirose and Creswell (2022) further noted that a multiple-case study includes a detailed examination of several cases to understand a specific phenomenon, allowing for the comparison and contrast of findings across different contexts. This design was employed to compare and contrast findings regarding the implications of language during phase transitions in Grade 4 classrooms.

3.3 Selection of the Participants

The researchers employed purposive sampling, as explained by Creswell and Creswell (2018), who highlighted that the primary benefit of this method is that it enables the researcher to choose participants who are most likely to offer pertinent and valuable insights. To gain relevant information, the selected participants comprised 12 teachers from three primary schools who were teaching Grade 4 learners and possessed a minimum of five years of teaching experience. The selected participants ranged in age from 30 to 70 years, with their teaching experience varying between 2 and 32 years. The three schools where data were collected included a Quintile 1 primary school located in a township within the Tshwane West district of Gauteng. Quintile 1 is a non-school fee-paying category. One school is a top performer, while the other two are low performers.

Moreover, the researcher's intention in using purposive sampling is to ensure that the selected participants have the necessary experience and qualifications to provide meaningful and insightful data relevant to the present study. By focusing on teachers with a minimum of five years of teaching experience, the researcher aims to gather in-depth knowledge and perspectives on the impact of language barriers during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by both learners and educators during this critical phase (Yin, 2018).

3.4 Data Collection

Mazhar (2021) noted that data collection is crucial as it enables researchers to gather information about a specific phenomenon of interest, which can be used to answer research questions, test hypotheses, and develop new knowledge or theories. To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and

research sites, codes were used to protect their identities. Participants were coded as P1SA to P12SC (P for participant and numeric for the number of participants), and SA to SC for schools (S for school and A for the name of the school). To obtain information, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to collect data. Semi-structured interviews in qualitative research are defined as a combination of structured and unstructured interviews, often supplemented with follow-up 'why' or 'how' questions that delve further into participants' perceptions and the issue being studied. Each participant was given 30 to 60 minutes to share their perspectives on how language barriers affect learners' performance in grade 4.

During the interviews, the researcher gathered participants' views on how they support learners with reading and learning challenges when transitioning from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in an English medium of instruction. Open-ended questions were used to determine the factors that hinder academic achievement during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Participants were informed about their participation in the study and were provided with informed consent letters to sign. As suggested by Chand (2025), the researcher maintained a reflective notebook to document all fieldwork-related activities and record personal observations regarding the study. In this study, the researchers recorded the interviews with teachers in their respective classrooms after the lessons.

3.5 Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six stages of thematic data analysis were adopted. During the first stage, the researcher familiarised herself with the collected data by rereading it several times and creating preliminary codes. The researcher tabulated the codes based on their frequency and sought to identify correlations between the codes, their frequency, and the underlying concepts. This involved combining codes, searching for themes, reviewing those themes, explaining and labelling them, and writing the report (Jablonka et al., 2024). The themes and subthemes that emerged from the findings are discussed in the next section.

4. Results and Findings

Through semi-structured interview questions, the researcher aimed to explore the experiences of South African teachers regarding language barriers in the classroom during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in township schools in the Tshwane West District. The present study was guided by the research question: How do language barriers affect the academic progress of Grade 4 learners? Twelve township primary school teachers were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of how they support learners with reading and learning challenges during the Grade 3 to Grade 4 transition in an English medium of instruction. This approach was aligned with qualitative research methodology, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Through the interviews, three overarching themes were identified, each comprising several subthemes.

4.1 Theme 1: Language Barriers

When asked about the factors that hinder academic achievement, most participants reported experiencing significant challenges caused by language barriers in Grade 4. They highlighted that some learners struggled to

communicate effectively, leading to frustration, disengagement, and behavioural issues. Furthermore, participants expressed that learners became indifferent, defiant, and even disrespectful when they were unable to comprehend instructions. They emphasised that they had limited resources or support to address these difficulties, leaving them feeling powerless in managing the impact of language barriers on classroom dynamics. P6SB underscored the factors that obstruct teaching and learning, stating:

"When learners transition to Grade 4, the sudden shift in the language of instruction creates confusion and frustration. Many learners struggle to follow lessons, and this often leads to behavioural challenges. As teachers, we feel helpless because we lack the necessary resources to bridge the gap."

The aforementioned quotation from P6SB suggests that learners encounter behavioural challenges as they endeavour to keep pace with lessons, which is exacerbated by language barriers. Their difficulties in comprehending the language of instruction result in frustration, disengagement, and disruptive behaviour within the classroom setting. In support of P6SB, P2SA strongly emphasised that:

"The transition to Grade 4 is difficult for many learners because they suddenly have to learn in a language they are not fully comfortable with. This leads to frustration, withdrawal, and even disruptive behaviour, making it challenging for teachers to maintain engagement in lessons."

The above quotation from P2SA illustrates that both teachers and learners are affected by the transition gap during the phase change from Grade 3 to Grade 4. When participants described the challenges, they expressed frustration. P2SA let out a deep sigh, indicating feelings of being overwhelmed and helpless about the situation. The researcher asked for greater clarity from P2SA who said:

"Ma'am, I have been working in this school for 10 years and learners from Grade 3 do not change. They always come to Grade 4 with little knowledge of the language of teaching and learning. The Grade 4 teachers must start from zero. This is frustrating us".

The above quote from P2SA clearly indicates that teachers are also frustrated by the phase transition, with language identified as the main challenge.

4.1.1 Sub-Theme 1: Home Language Versus Language of Teaching and Learning

Several participants highlighted a significant concern regarding the language of instruction in schools. They observed that most learners in the community struggle to understand the designated home language taught at school, which is Setswana. However, at home, many of these learners predominantly communicate in Xitsonga, isiZulu, and Sepedi. This situation poses a challenge, as learners must first acquire proficiency in Setswana as their home language before progressing to English. This was evident when P10SC pointed out that:

"Many of my learners struggle because the home language taught at school is Setswana, but at home, they speak Xitshonga, isiZulu, Sepedi, and Shona. Before they can even grasp English, they must first learn Setswana, which is unfamiliar to them. Code-switching is supposed to help, but often, the learners don't understand the language I switch to, making it even harder to bridge the gap."

The quotation above from P10SC demonstrates that teachers make an effort to support learners' understanding by code-switching during lessons. However, this approach is not always effective, as some learners are unfamiliar with the language the teacher uses for switching, which further complicates their comprehension.

Participants also noted that learners lack reading skills in both their home language and EFAL. When P7SB was asked about teaching reading skills to Grade 4 learners, he responded with frustration in his eyes and said:

"You see, ma'am, teaching reading skills in Grade 4 is incredibly difficult because these learners were not taught in English in Grade 3, and so they struggle to read at all. What makes it even more challenging is that they also lack reading skills in Setswana, which means they have no strong foundation in either language. Without basic literacy in their home language, transitioning to English becomes an even greater hurdle."

Without a strong literacy foundation, learners face difficulties in decoding words, understanding sentence structure, and grasping the meaning of texts. In addition to what P7SB said, P9SC also pointed out that:

"Many of my learners struggle with reading comprehension in both their home language and English. Without a strong literacy foundation, they find it difficult to decode words, understand sentence structures, and grasp the meaning of texts. As teachers, we try to implement interventions like remedial reading programmes and individualised support, but limited resources, large class sizes, and time constraints make it challenging. Unfortunately, many learners continue to fall behind, affecting their academic performance and confidence in learning."

The quote from P9SC clearly indicates that Grade 4 learners struggle with reading comprehension in both their home language and English. Although teachers are eager to support them, challenges such as limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and time constraints make it difficult to provide effective assistance. Consequently, many learners advance to the next grade without acquiring essential reading skills.

4.1.2 Sub-Theme 2: Poor reading comprehension

During interviews with the participants, it became evident that another significant challenge is the learners' lack of understanding of the language. Participants explained that even those learners who possess the ability to read do not engage in reading for comprehension but merely perform the act of reading without

genuinely grasping the content. Participant 1SA expressed mixed emotions when he stated that:

"To be honest, ma'am, many of my learners can read the words on the page, but they don't truly understand what they're reading. They go through the motions, but there's no comprehension, no connection to the meaning behind the text. Without comprehension, reading becomes an empty exercise rather than a tool for learning and growth."

The quote from P1SA underscores that while some learners exhibit basic reading skills, they encounter difficulties with comprehension. This observation is consistent with findings from the PIRLS 2021 study, which reported that "81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are unable to read for understanding." The deficiency in comprehension skills poses a substantial challenge to literacy development, impacting learners' capacity to engage meaningfully with texts and progress academically. P8SB corroborated P9SC's statement and, with concern in her eyes, elaborated that:

"It is heartbreaking, honestly, to see my Grade 4 learners struggle with reading comprehension in both their home language and English. Many of them can read words, but they don't understand what they are reading. We try our best to support them, but with limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and time constraints, it feels like an uphill battle. The most painful part is knowing that some of these learners will move on to the next grade without mastering basic reading skills, which will only make their academic journey even harder."

Furthermore, the researcher asked P12SC if her learners could read with understanding, and she said:

"Ma'am, every day I see my Grade 4 learners struggle with reading comprehension, and it pains me. Some can read words, but they don't grasp the meaning behind them."

The above quotation from P12SC highlights the frustration participants feel regarding Grade 4 learners' struggles with reading comprehension. It also reflects the challenges teachers face as they try to close the literacy gap, despite the difficulties in providing effective reading instruction. The findings from P12SC align with those from P2SA, which emphasised that learners' comprehension skills are weakened by language barriers.

She said:

"In my classroom, learners are struggling to comprehend the English texts. They might be able to read with you, but when you ask them what the sentence means, you will get an alarming shock. Learners do not understand what they are reading in my class."

Similar to P2SA, P10SC holds that the teacher should teach comprehension skills. P10SC said:

“Teachers must take accountability for learners’ poor comprehension. We all know that these learners will be learning in English for the first time, so we must teach these learners how to read for meaning. However, despite all my efforts, I still find that most learners’ reason for poor comprehension skills is due to a language barrier. They try to read but still cannot share what the story is all about.”

The above quotations demonstrate that the transition is negatively affecting learners’ comprehension. Furthermore, participants revealed that teachers are willing to assist learners with comprehension, but the language barrier poses a challenge. Conversely, P11SC believes that:

“I have realised that learners can be able to comprehend what they read in their mother tongue. What I mean is, learners read in English and comprehend in Sepedi. Therefore, for them to share their understanding, I start with provoking questions in their languages, then I will see an improved participation from them.”

Similar to P11SC, P8SB confirmed that teachers must allow learners to express themselves in their mother tongue. P8SB indicated that:

“Look, I have observed that if you only use English in the class, learners will not participate. However, allowing learners to use translation for participation has improved classroom engagement and comprehension skills. Learners struggle with English; we must allow them to try mixing English with their mother tongue. That does not improve participation, but also comprehension. They will be able to pass the comprehension test. Even though we will have spelling problems.”

The above quotations demonstrate that language transition has a significant impact on learners’ comprehension and participation.

4.1.3 Sub-Theme 3: Limited English Proficiency

The participants also highlighted that, despite numerous efforts to enhance learners’ reading abilities, these interventions frequently fall short, as many students commence Grade 4 with limited proficiency in English. The participants stressed that the transition to English as the primary language of instruction presented a significant obstacle, as learners faced challenges in comprehension, vocabulary development, and fluency. Furthermore, the participants emphasised that the learners’ difficulties were exacerbated by minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, weak foundational literacy skills in their home language, and a lack of personalised support. Consequently, many learners experienced challenges in subjects that required strong reading and language comprehension skills. This was evidenced when P11SC expressed frustration by stating that:

"Many of my Grade 4 learners struggle with reading comprehension because their English proficiency is so low when they enter this grade. Despite all the interventions we try, the language barrier makes it difficult for them to grasp the meaning of texts. Without a strong foundation, they fall behind in other subjects too, and it's heartbreaking to see them struggle."

The above quote from P11SC highlights that the English proficiency of learners entering Grade 4 is very low. In support of P11SC, P4SA added that:

"Teaching reading comprehension to Grade 4 learners is a significant challenge, as many begin this grade with low English proficiency. I will start the lesson with prior knowledge exercises to activate their thinking. Then allow them to try to speak in English to share their knowledge."

The quote from P4SC illustrates the difficulty of teaching reading comprehension when learners enter Grade 4 with limited English skills. The participant also shared her teaching strategy to support these learners. Some participants have lost hope; P5SB expressed that she even regretted choosing this career, saying so with regret:

"To be honest, ma'am, I've never imagined that teaching would feel this discouraging. Every day, I watch my Grade 4 learners struggle with reading comprehension because of their limited English proficiency. No matter how many interventions we try, the language barrier remains a major obstacle."

The P5SB was asked to share her teaching experience, and she said that:

"At first, I grouped them according to cognitive level, then gave different texts. Once all groups can read their texts, I then combine it into one piece of work. But they will still struggle to read the entire document".

The quotation from P5SB reflects the deep frustration and hopelessness some teachers experience when trying to support learners facing literacy challenges. In contrast, P3SA indicated that her experience was different. With a smile on her face, she said:

"Over the years, I've noticed a little improvement in the English proficiency of my Grade 4 learners. This is because I used different scaffolding techniques, which I learned from a course that I attended. I develop materials that will accommodate my learners' language ability. It's encouraging to see progress, and I believe continued support and effective strategies can further enhance their literacy skills."

The quote from P3SA reflects the optimism of some teachers who have observed improvements in learners' English proficiency. It also suggests that if teachers receive support, there could be further enhancements in learners' level of English proficiency when they enter Grade 4.

4.1.4 Sub-Theme 4: Teamwork

Participants were asked about better ways to improve the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Some highlighted that effective teamwork between Grade 3 and Grade 4 teachers made the transition easier for learners. Conversely, some participants indicated that teamwork in township schools was challenging. They revealed that a lack of collaboration and communication between the two phases hindered the academic progress of English FAL learners. P3SA indicated that:

"We don't have a document for a proper handover. We, the Grade 3 teachers, finish the year and submit reports, but we never sit with the Grade 4 teachers to explain where the learners struggle, especially in English. Now that you are asking about it, I think next year I will do that".

P5SB echoed P3SA's concerns by stating that a lack of collaboration between the two grades made it difficult to plan effectively for language support. P5SB strongly emphasised that:

"It becomes frustrating in January when learners arrive in Grade 4, and they cannot read or write well in English, and we are not prepared for that. I believe that if we worked together, we could know what to expect and how to support the learners academically."

The above quotations show that participants were not working as a team, but during the interviews, they had an idea of how they could collaborate effectively. They blamed one another. The Grade 4 teacher participants blamed the Grade 3 teachers for not doing their jobs thoroughly, while the Grade 3 teachers attributed it to the long December school holidays. P9SC emphasised:

"We are doing our job. The problem is that the Grade 4 teachers think our work is just playing with learners, forgetting that in the Foundation Phase, learners learn through playing. We tried to invite them to our meetings, but they don't attend, and they act like their phase is more serious than ours."

The above quotations demonstrate that teachers in both grades do not take accountability for teaching the fundamentals of EFAL. Not all participants shared the same sense of blame and frustration. P4SA had this to say:

"We need to have planned meetings, maybe once a term, to discuss learners' progress. We have to understand what they did in Grade 3 so that we can continue from there instead of starting from scratch."

P7SB confirmed that:

"In my school, we have a report for each learner's learning ability. The grade 3 teacher will group them for us and suggest a possible strategy to support the learner. This collaboration improves learners' learning process."

From the same point of view, PISA articulated that:

“I took it upon myself to have an open communication with the previous grade teacher to plan for effective scaffolding techniques for my learners. I have attended a workshop, and they trained us on how to work as a team.”

It is evident from the participation that they believe teamwork is the best strategy for a smooth transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4. When participants work as a team, learners will benefit, and their learning will improve.

5. Discussion

This study underscores the enduring language barrier that significantly impedes academic progress during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in township schools within the Tshwane West District. The findings align with the SVR, which posits that learners must be exposed to language comprehension and decoding skills to become proficient readers (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). Furthermore, the study's findings corroborate the SVR, highlighting that disruptions in these areas have substantial implications for both decoding and linguistic comprehension, ultimately leading to poor academic performance (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

Teachers have reported considerable challenges, including inadequate training, insufficient learner support materials, and a misalignment between curriculum expectations and learner readiness. From the perspective of SVR theory, it can be argued that consistent and systematic instruction is essential for the development of decoding skills, particularly given that learners have been educated in a different language for both teaching and learning. Additionally, it was found that although basic decoding skills may be present, second-language learners struggle when their linguistic comprehension remains underdeveloped (Cummins, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

These challenges are exacerbated by broader systemic limitations, which leave educators without the necessary tools to effectively support language development. The SVR further supports the findings by emphasising the necessity for teachers to possess adequate resources, as the development of reading comprehension relies on the successful integration of decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Benson (2021) articulates that discontinuity in teaching approaches adversely affects reading development within multilingual contexts. The SVR theory illustrates that interrupted teaching and learning can impede the growth of both decoding and linguistic comprehension.

When educators are equipped with effective teaching tools, they can scaffold decoding by offering repeated exposure and multimodal support, which is particularly crucial in large or linguistically diverse classrooms (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The findings substantiate the SVR, indicating that negative emotional responses stemming from inadequate development of decoding and linguistic comprehension may lead to anxiety, frustration, and diminished academic performance (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Moreover, Duke and Cartwright

(2021) further contend that when learners find it challenging to meet reading demands, they experience cognitive overload, triggering adverse emotional responses. Benson (2021) and Heugh (2011) emphasise that educators frequently feel ill-equipped to teach second-language literacy development in diverse classrooms. This demonstrates that language serves as a barrier on both international and national levels.

The SVR corroborates previous findings by asserting that collaborative planning is essential for ensuring the continuity and progression of decoding and linguistic comprehension across different educational phases (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Consequently, the development of decoding and language comprehension necessitates a systematic, cumulative, and aligned pedagogical approach over time. However, Smith (2025) posits that collaborative planning between these two phases fosters a shared understanding of learners' reading competencies and facilitates scaffolding progression from Grade 3 to Grade 4. Participants emphasised that collaborative efforts among educators are crucial in assisting learners as they transition to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4. Nel and Muller (2010) elucidate that collaborative teaching practices, including team planning and peer support, have been shown to enhance learner outcomes during language transitions.

Several participants consistently highlighted the challenges posed by the disjunction between learners' home language and the language of instruction upon entering Grade 4. These findings are supported by Heugh (2011), who indicates that teachers observed learners comprehending concepts more effectively when instructed in their mother tongue, yet struggling to articulate their thoughts or understand subject matter when presented in English. Consequently, Shah and Kadir (2025) validated these findings by noting that many educators resort to code-switching or translanguaging strategies to assist learners' comprehension, despite such practices being restricted by official language policies.

The findings are further substantiated by the PIRLS study, which reveals that 81% of Grade 4 South African learners are unable to read for meaning (Howie et al., 2017). Participants additionally noted that some learners possessed foundational reading skills but continued to encounter obstacles in grasping the meaning of texts, indicating a disconnect between word recognition and true understanding. This aligns with the outcomes of the PIRLS 2021 study, which demonstrated that a substantial majority, specifically 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa, lack reading comprehension skills.

Selvathurai and Ismail (2024) explain that the deficiency in comprehension skills poses a significant challenge to literacy development, thereby affecting learners' ability to engage meaningfully with texts and progress academically. Furthermore, Spaull (2023) argues that the inability of the majority of Grade 4 children to read for meaning constitutes a national crisis, as it undermines their capacity to comprehend written content and, consequently, to learn effectively across all subjects.

Most participants indicated that despite the implementation of various strategies aimed at enhancing learners' reading skills, these initiatives often failed to achieve the anticipated outcomes. Consequently, a significant number of learners commenced Grade 4 without sufficient proficiency in the English language, hindering their ability to interact meaningfully with academic content (Cummins, 2000). The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2017) asserts that learners in Grade 4 frequently lack the requisite English language skills necessary for effective engagement with the curriculum, particularly in educational settings where English is adopted as the primary medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards.

6. Conclusion

The present study emphasises that language barriers represent a significant obstacle to academic success in EFAL, particularly during the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 in township schools. Based on qualitative data collected from teachers in the Tshwane West District, this study demonstrates that the shift to English-only instruction, combined with inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and a mismatch between curriculum expectations and learner readiness, undermines effective learning and diminishes learner confidence. This situation reflects a disconnect between decoding and comprehension, as highlighted in the SVR. The change from a single-teacher model to multiple subject-specific educators further complicates this process.

To address these challenges, the present study advocates for earlier and more consistent EFAL instruction, targeted professional development for Intermediate Phase teachers, and enhanced parental engagement in literacy support. Ultimately, it calls for a critical reassessment of how language policies and curricula are implemented to ensure equitable learning opportunities in multilingual educational settings. The components of the Simple View of Reading should be addressed to enable learners to develop both decoding and linguistic comprehension skills.

7. Recommendations

- The present study recommends designing a bridging curriculum that gradually develops EFAL skills between Grade 3 and Grade 4, with a focus on vocabulary, phonics, and reading comprehension. It also suggests encouraging Grade 3 and 4 teachers to co-plan lessons and share learner profiles to ensure continuity, involving local volunteers or retired educators to support literacy activities in township communities, and revising curriculum policy to better bridge the transition between the two grades.
- Urge the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to amend the CAPS curriculum by incorporating clear indicators that guide learner progression from one educational phase to the next.
- Provide specialised training for teachers to equip them with the strategies and knowledge needed to effectively prepare learners for transitioning to a new language of learning and teaching (LoLT).

- Motivate schools to implement reading initiatives that actively involve parents and children in shared reading activities, fostering consistent literacy engagement at home and strengthening learners' reading development.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have influenced the writing of this article.

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9. Limitations of the study

The present study was conducted in a district with 194 schools, comprising 109 primary and 82 high schools. However, data was collected from only three schools in Tshwane West to avoid data saturation. Additionally, due to a limited time frame, the study could not collect data from learners or observe teachers in the classroom. Data was gathered solely through interviews with teachers, which limited input from learners. In future research, the researcher plans to collect data from both teachers and learners, as well as observe the teaching and learning processes.

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