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Article

Examining Obstacles that Impede the Speaking of English in Literacy Classrooms: A case of two Primary Schools in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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Abstract: Learners often encounter impediments that hamper their ability to proficiently speak English. This study sought to research and determine the obstacles that impede the speaking of English in literacy classrooms. In particular, the study addressed the following research objectives: (i) to identify the language of teaching and learning that is primarily used in English First Additional Language (EFAL) literacy classrooms, and (ii) to examine why rural primary schools lack English speaking practices. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data from two Subject Education Specialists, four Grade 4 EFAL teachers, and two Heads of Department from selected primary schools. Data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Interaction theory informed the study, as this theory emphasises the relevance of inputs and modified interaction(s) with respect to learning a second language. Multifaceted challenges impede the speaking of English in literacy classrooms, and these include lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and limited opportunities to practice speaking. Teachers should minimise using code-switching teaching strategy in Grade 4 EFAL literacy classrooms, as this practice can further delay learners' understanding of course content and hinder their proficiency in English. Rather, alternative techniques have to be developed and employed to improve speaking of English in the classroom.

Keywords: Literacy classroom; English First Additional Language; speaking ability; teachers; learners

Introduction

English has been recognised as an international language that is commonly used for communication the world over (Abdullah et al., 2019; Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). Advanced proficiency in English is, therefore, an important factor in determining educational and economic opportunities for most people in modern society (Long, 2014). In line with this understanding, most countries are making concerted efforts to ensure that English is taught in schools. For instance, in some countries, such as Indonesia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, English is a compulsory subject from primary through to secondary school (Taslim, 2019). Indeed, the situation is the same for most countries located in the global south as, due to global changes, it has become imperative for learners to master the English language for easy communication in the classroom and for them to be able to generally access information (Taslim, 2019; Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). The ability to proficiently speak English is, thus, essential in educational settings worldwide, yet many learners still encounter challenges that impede their development in this critical skill.

Previous findings have indicated that learning "English First Additional Language'' (EFAL) is challenging, as learners often struggle to express themselves in the classroom. This problem continues even

in tertiary institutions, as students have difficulty speaking English during lectures (Galebole & Mothudi, 2022; Keep & Linake, 2021). To learn a language, it is vital for a learner to master all linguistic skills, namely listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Although all these skills are important, authors argue that speaking surpasses the others, as spoken communication takes place daily in both formal and informal contexts (Abdullah et al., 2022). Despite such acknowledgement, teaching speaking skills in English classrooms is, however, often neglected (Christison, 2022). Since people generally learn to talk before, they learn how to write, learning an additional language must (primarily) involve learning how to speak the language (Abdullah et al, 2022). With this understanding, the present study focused on speaking, as it is taught and learnt within the English literacy classroom, since this skill forms one of the four linguistic skills that must be mastered to effectively learn and become proficient in English.

An individual's speaking ability allows them to communicate orally with others in the exchanging or sharing of information (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). To speak English fluently, leaners need to understand and have a good grasp of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Syakur et al, 2020). South Africa's "Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement" (2011:8) highlights that:

> *"…in South Africa, many children start using their additional language, which is often English, as the language of learning and teaching in Grade 4 and this means that they must reach a high level of competence in English by the end of Grade 3*"

This statement poses various problems, however, as Ramadiro and Porteus (2017) argue, English is scarcely used in rural schools, communities, and this disadvantages learners in these areas, as there are limited opportunities for them to practice speaking the language. The authors further note that learners' speaking skills will be incompletely developed by the end of the third Grade, which makes it difficult for them to understand instructions in English in Grade 4. Maluleke (2019) pointed out that learners in South Africa face major challenges as they struggle to communicate in English in the classroom. South Africa has 12 official languages which are as follows isiNdebele, Sesotho, Sepedi, isiXhosa, siSwati, Xitsonga, isiZulu, Setswana, Afrikaans, Tshivenda, English and Sign language (Nugraha, 2019). However, English remains the dominant language used in learning and teaching, even though most learners lack English language proficiency (Nugraha, 2019).

Poor speaking is not just a South African problem as most countries worldwide experience the same challenge. Several studies have demonstrated the inability of learners around the world to speak English effectively and confidently. For instance, a 2020 study by Riadil highlights that students from Tidar University in Indonesia mainly utilise their mother tongue in English classes, as they have a limited vocabulary and tend to lack confidence in speaking English. Similarly, results from a study by Namaziandost and Nasri (2019) highlighted that Iranian students often obtain low marks in class assessments that require speaking in English. Results from Shilongo's (2007) study showed that teachers in Namibia generally struggle to teach in English, and learners similarly do not understand instructions when given to them in English.

Of further note is that there is a knowledge gap in the extant literature pertaining to speaking skills in the classroom, as most studies have tended to prioritise writing, listening, and reading skills despite it being vital for learners to master *all* linguistic skills (i.e., including speaking). Evidence that is available within the limited research into English speaking does, however, confirm that second language learners in the intermediate schooling phase tend to struggle with speaking English during class activities (Cadiz-Gabejan, 2021; Nkome, 2015). There is, thus, need for additional research on English speaking skills in different classroom settings, as such research could form an important step in discovering ways to enhance learning in this area. The present study, therefore, sought to research and determine some of the obstacles that impede the speaking of English in Grade 4 literacy classrooms. The study held the following two research objectives: (i) to identify the LOLT that is primarily used in EFAL literacy classrooms, and (ii) to examine why rural primary schools lack English speaking practices in their literacy classrooms.

Literature Review

1. Challenges that Prevent Learners from Speaking English in Literacy Classrooms

Multiple factors affect the scholarship of foreign languages, including English. Of note is that although learners have a record of failing to speak English in the classroom, teachers also have their share of problems. According to Kanyopa and Mokhele-Makgalwa (2024), learners face psychological challenges that hamper their learning. One of the reasons why learners often struggle to speak English is anxiety (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020; Muniandy, 2012) however, this factor is not exclusive to English and can negatively affect the learning of foreign languages in general (Wu & Kang, 2023). Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) have noted that classroom activities often heighten speaking anxiety. Learners also tend to struggle to utter any word or sentence in a foreign language due to fear. Nkome (2015) similarly found that some learners hardly ever speak English in classroom settings, as they are shy to respond to questions and afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed by fellow classmates.

According to Evans and Nthulana (2018) and Hlabisa et al (2023), learners in the 4th Grade often struggle to master English because they have not yet mastered cognitive academic language proficiency in their home language. Galebole and Mothudi (2022) also conducted a study that focused on Botswana Junior Secondary School learners' reluctance to use English in the classroom. Results from the study showed that inadequate proficiency in English, preference for mother tongue, and a lack of motivation and confidence are all barriers that impede learners' speaking ability.

2. Challenges that Impede Teachers from Speaking English in Literacy Classrooms

A study by Loy and Wahab (2020) highlighted various deterrents that impede teachers from speaking English in the classroom, include lack of confidence, low proficiency in the language, negative attitudes towards English, and workplace stress. Findings from a study conducted by Sibomana (2022), conducted in Rwanda, further confirmed that transitioning from home language to English is a challenge for teachers and learners, due to a mutual lack of English proficiency.

Previous studies show that many teachers often use code-switching in literacy classrooms as a means to deal with their own lack of English proficiency as well as to carter to leaners who fail to understand English instructions. For example, Galebole and Mothudi (2022) found that teachers face various challenges when teaching English, and that in order to compensate for some of these challenges they will, at times, use their (and/or their learners') mother tongue or a common vernacular language (i.e., Setswana in the case of this particular study) as a mode of delivery. Nkome (2015) further highlighted that educators often use both English and Sesotho during lessons. These findings were confirmed by Mweli (2018), whose investigation revealed that Grade 4 teachers generally prefer using indigenous languages, since they experience many challenges with utilising English as a preferred LoLT in the EFAL classroom. A study conducted by Evans and Nthulana (2018) similarly confirmed that Tshivenda-speaking teachers make use of code-switching as a coping strategy when they lack the necessary English language ability.

Overly relying on code-switching in EFAL classrooms can be helpful for improving learners' understanding of course content (Galebole & Mothudi, 2022) however, the question that can be raised is whether codeswitching is useful for improving learners' ability and/or proficiency in English. Indeed, Sa'ad and Usman (2014) argue that the use of mother tongue in English classrooms is one of the causes of learners' poor performance. Such mother-tongue usage has become a significant problem, as both teachers and learners have been found to struggle with speaking and using English as the LoLT.

Findings by Loy and Wahab (2020) indicated that using English in classroom context is affected by the environment in which learning takes place. The authors determined that there are contextual barriers such as time constraints, inadequate administrative support, poor classroom environments (i.e., insufficient resources), high enrolment numbers that outmatch the number of educators, and a lack of parental involvement in motivating learners to speak English. The situation becomes even more complicated when teachers exhibit a preference for traditional teaching methods that do not create a conducive learning environment for learning to speak English comfortably (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). Thus, results from these studies showed that

teachers use code-switching to cater to learners who do not understand English and at the same time because they themselves lack English speaking abilities.

3. Strategies to Increase Speaking Proficiency in English Literacy Classrooms

There is a need to find strategies that can better assist learners to gain confidence in speaking English in the classroom setting. One such strategy could be to allocate group activities that naturally encourage speaking through peer-to-peer communication, which in turn could improve learners' speaking confidence (Cadiz-Gabejan 2021). Cadiz-Gabejan (2021) is of the view that second-language learners, in most instances, become passive during class activities; hence group tasks could encourage these learners to 'catch up to' and engage with faster or first-language learners who can share their knowledge. The aim of such group activities is to encourage a learner-centred approach to both learning and social interaction.

Traditional classrooms still emphasise the other three skills of reading, writing, and listening at the expense of speaking (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). It is vital, therefore, for learners to be immersed in all aspects of language learning and acquisition by enabling and assessing learners' ability to engage in conversation (Abdullah et al., 2019). Such learning and assessment can only be achieved by giving learners opportunities to actively practise speaking in EFAL classrooms.

In addition to providing such opportunities, teachers should also create a warm environment for leaners by encouraging them to speak English in class settings even if they make mistakes, as their speaking skills will improve in the process (Thao & Nguyet, 2019). Thus, teachers should create a warm environment to encourage learning and design educational materials that enable learners to relate to the subject matter and which communicate and respond to learners' needs (Gamede, 2023).

Teachers should, furthermore, attempt to incorporate technology into their teaching and learning practices. Social media, for example, could be utilised as an education tool – if used properly – as it already takes up much of learners' time (Namaziandost et al., 2019; Yaccob & Yunus, 2019). Some of the technology-related strategies that have previously been successfully implemented in the teaching and learning environment have been noted in a study by Syakur et al. (2020), where the results indicated that *Absyak*, a web-based learning model, was effectively used to improve learners from the Surabaya Pharmacy Academy in Indonesia's speaking skills. Furthermore, authors such as Abdullah et al. (2019) have recommended using the 'flipped classroom' model. An analysis of the study results confirmed that the flipped classroom approach can be effective in the EFAL speaking classroom, as learners recorded significant improvements between their pre- and post-oral proficiency tests.

Games can also be used as an approach to guide and develop EFAL learners' speaking skills (Hao & Lee, 2021; Hur, 2023; David et al, (2015). However, it is vital for educators to design games in accordance with the level of their learners in order for such a teaching approach to have a meaningful effect. Another important aspect noted by Chen (2016) is that games enable shy and/or more passive learners to learn through play. Games can also reinforce previously learnt content. In addition, games motivate learning of languages by reducing anxiety among learners (Huang & Hwang, 2013). According to Yaccob and Yunus (2019) games can be utilised to enhance EFAL learners' grammar acquisition and allow them to practise speaking.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study uses an interaction hypothesis theory. Interaction hypothesis was developed by Michael Long four decades ago, 1981 to be precise. The theory states that inputs and modified interactions are important when learning another language (Long, 1983). As part of this theory, Long argues that challenges related to speaking a new language are caused by a lack of opportunities to practise said speaking. The theory assumes, therefore, that comprehensible input is required in order for learning a second language to take place effectively. Such input can and should be modified so as to benefit leaners (e.g., by adopting a slower speaking speed and/or using simplified vocabulary), and the absence of inputs hampers progress. Communication is also vital for the process of language acquisition to take place (Long, 1983).

Thus, the interaction hypothesis theory highlights that conversational interaction or dialogue can improve learners' speaking skills. In many countries in which English is taught as an additional language, the

environment is, however, not conducive for practicing English speaking – especially outside the classroom setting (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). Namaziandost and Nasri's (2019) study revealed that Iranian EFL students' speaking abilities were enhanced through learner-to-learner interaction in the classroom. Based on such findings and Long's theory, it is vital, therefore, that teachers ensure that they encourage classroom interaction as much as possible in order to fully develop their learners' speaking skills.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This paper utilised a qualitative research design because it enables the collection of non-numerical data when conducting a study (Leavy, 2022). This study, therefore, utilised structured interviews to gather qualitative data. Non-numerical data was therefore collected from interviewees.

2. Sampling Techniques and Study Participants

Purposive sampling was used to collect data from two grade 4 teachers, two Subject Education Specialists and two Head of Departments from a primary school in Lady Frere, which amounts to six participants. These participants possess knowledge regarding the teaching and learning of grade 4 learners at selected primary schools in Lady Frere, a rural town in the Eastern Cape province. The data was limited as the study was conducted during Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), whereby movement was restricted.

There were six participants in this study. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms of participants, which were two EFAL teachers, two HoDs, and two SESs from the two selected primary schools.

Table 1. Pseudonyms of Study Participants

	Participants
School A	Teacher A
	HoD^{A}
School B	Teacher B
	HoD^{B}
Subject education specialists	SES^{1}
	SES^{2}

Source: Authors (2024)

As evidenced in Table 1, pseudonyms are used to refer to the study participants. Participants from School A are, thus, referred to as Teacher A and HoD^{A}, while participants from School B are referred to as Teacher B and HoD^{B}. The two SESs are referred to as SES^{1} and SES^{2}, respectively.

3. Data Collection

This paper, thus, utilised semi-structured interviews in collecting data from two Grade 4 EFAL teachers as well as from two HoDs employed at two primary schools located in Lady Frere – a rural town that falls under the Chris Hani West district of South Africa's Eastern Cape province. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two District Office SESs. In total, data was collected from two grade 4 teachers, two Subject Education Specialists and two Head of Department from a primary school in Lady Frere, and this amounts to six interviews.

4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through interviews was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2020) highlight that inductive thematic analysis should be utilised when researchers need to analyse interview transcripts. Thus, this method was employed for the analysis undertaken in this study. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed after each interview, transcribed data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis and coded into themes. The following steps were done in analysing data as guided by Braun

and Clarke (2020): (i) familiarising with data by reading through the transcript, (ii) generating code categories, (iii) searching for themes, iv) reviewing themes and naming of appropriate themes supported by data. The themes that emerged from the analysis have been presented in a narrative format.

Findings

This section presents results from interviews conducted with the participant teachers, HoDs, and SESs from the two selected primary schools noted previously. The analysis was guided by the objectives put forward in this study, and the themes were derived from the interview responses gained from participants.

1. Lolt Used in EFAL Literacy Classrooms

Interview responses regarding the LoLT in Grade 4 classrooms at the two schools selected for this study highlighted that teachers generally utilise two languages, namely English and vernacular (isiXhosa) when presenting lessons in their EFAL literacy classrooms. This finding was factual for and across both schools.

Code-switching

What became clear from participant responses was that all the participants, as well as their learners, speak isiXhosa – a vernacular that is dominant in the Eastern Cape province wherein the study was conducted – as their primary or home language. The prominence of this vernacular has created an enabling environment for code-switching in the classrooms. HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) for example, indicated:

> *"Having same mother tongue as the learners is an advantage in explaining English terms"*

In other words, the use of code-switching is effective when both teachers and learners speak the same vernacular, which is a resource used by teachers in assisting learners to grasp English concepts. The results further showed that the code-switching strategy is encouraged for use in EFAL literacy classrooms at both primary schools – as confirmed by the following participant responses:

> *"No, learners in Grade 4 hardly hear spoken English so I explain in IsiXhosa…"*
>
> (Teacher A, Male, 52 years old).

> *"…it also depends on the type of learner and the fact that the learners were taught in their home language in the first 3 grades"*
>
> (Teacher B, Female, 44 years old).

The HoDs also shared the same sentiments as they, too, tend to utilise code-switching in EFAL literacy classrooms. As HoD^{A} indicated:

> "*…it helps me understand which learners struggle with English instruction".*
>
> (Female, 47 years old)

From the responses, evidence was gained that teachers and HoDs alike, from both participating schools, use code-switching in Grade 4 EFAL literacy classrooms to help learners grasp content better. Furthermore, the benefits of code-switching were confirmed by various participants. For example, HoD^{A} noted:

> *"It is for better understanding, but it is not supposed to be used regularly."*
>
> (Teacher A Male, 52 years old)

> "*I use code-switching to equip learners with new English words."*
>
> (Female, 47 years old)

HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) said:

"It is used to clarify unfamiliar English terms...."

Teacher B (Female, 44 years old) also claimed:

"It s used to understand English instructions…."

Based on such responses, code-switching is often used to explain concepts and give instructions. Although code-switching is beneficial when used to clarify or explain concepts in a language that learners understand better, the downside is that it can ultimately delay the learning process, as learners may continue to struggle to express themselves in the target language. As HoD^{A} (Female, 47 years old) confirmed:

"We use isiXhosa to clarify terms and this affects their English-speaking skills."

HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) added:

"English only dominates slightly during lessons… affecting how fast the learners can know how to speak."

Teacher A's (Male, 52 years old) sentiments aligned with those of the HoDs, noting:

".. mother-tongue is dominant in and outside classrooms. This delays the pace at which the learners can speak English".

Thus, both the participating teachers and HoDs from both primary schools use code-switching in EFAL literacy classrooms as a technique to enhance understanding, but they are not yet using English as a predominant LOLT at the Grade 4 level because the learners are still in a transition phase. As a result, teachers tend to use vernacular for instructions but acknowledge that the use of code-switching has its weaknesses – especially as the practice delays learners' English speaking skills. HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) further acknowledged

"every teacher has a role to play for learners to be able to communicate in English."

It is essential to promote English usage in the classroom. The practice of preferring English could assist both teachers and learners in avoiding code-switching.

It is vital for teachers to encourage one another to prioritise the LoLT in the Grade 4 classroom. As Teacher A (Male, 52 years old) noted:

"*…Grade-4 colleagues are supposed to know that hardly teaching in English affects acquiring English"*.

HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) similarly stated:

"I do encourage but not often. Teachers know that they should use English when teaching…it is just that learners don't understand instructions".

Since learners at the Grade 4 level are unlikely to initiate English usage, it remains the sole responsibility of teachers to ensure that they comply with the language policy.

Complying with the Grade4 LoLT Language Policy

Both HoD^{A} (Female, 47 years old) and Teacher B (Female, 44 years old) are of the view that complying with policies is vital if schools wish to support learners' ability to use the LoLT (i.e., English) effectively. Conversely, Teacher A (Male, 52 years old) and HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) warned, although teachers comply, it is possible for learning and teaching to become more difficult if mother-tongue instruction is not applied, at times, as the intervention of using learners' mother tongue is often required and depended upon by the learners being taught. The HoDs from both schools also stated that teachers have to comply by using LoLT. The participating SESs further aired their concerns in this regard. SES[1] (Female, 55 years old), for example, claimed:

> *"We encourage schools to have a policy so that learners can learn easily and express themselves".*

From this statement, it is clear that the SES encourages schools to have some kind of language policy in place that sufficiently outlines and guides teaching and learning practices. Furthermore, both teachers and learners should then abide by the policy.

2. Factors that Affect English-Speaking Skills in Literacy Classrooms

Lack Of Opportunities To Practice Speaking

The study revealed that teachers at the selected primary schools tend to lack English speaking skills themselves. This lack is due to few opportunities being available for them to practice speaking English. For example, Teacher A (Male, 52 years old) claimed:

> *"I have never been exposed to English-speaking platforms, I only take chances in my classrooms because learners cannot judge me".*

Teacher B (Female, 44 years old) similarly stated:

> *"I am better in writing but speaking is a problem, in Eastern Cape we really do not have the opportunity to speak in English oftenly".*

Teacher A (Male, 52 years old) then emphasised:

> *"Being through an education that limits you in English speaking had been a problem, I can't speak fluently and that is why my colleagues and I send our children to former Model C schools. They reach Grade 4 already speaking well in English because English is dominant in and outside classrooms".*

The participating HoDs, however, stated that they could communicate well in English. For example, HoD^{A} (Female, 47 years old) said:

> *"I don't think I have difficulties…I can speak in English, my vocabulary is not bad."*

It was confirmed that the HoDs are fluent in English because of the years they spent as teachers and also exposure. The study participants further corroborated that their learners lack English speaking skills in their EFAL literacy classrooms. As HoD^{A} (Female, 47 years old) indicated:

> *"…learners are not used to using English all the time, they are used to their mother tongue from previous grades".*

Teacher A (Male, 52 years old) similarly stated:

"…learners don't get used to spoken English, they suffer a lot in gaining the speaking skill in a short period."

Thus, a major challenge facing learners is that most learners struggle to understand English. This inability leads to code-switching or the predominant use of the mother tongue in the classroom. All participants also confirmed that both learners and teachers lack exposure to English-speaking environments because both participating schools are in rural towns and, as such, they have limited opportunities to practice speaking.

Learners Lack Confidence in Expressing Themselves in English

All participants alluded to the fact that learners often lack confidence in expressing themselves in English during EFAL literacy classroom activities. For example, HoD^{A} (Female, 47 years old) said:

"Learners have no confidence in discussing English, they use their mother tongue".

HoD^{B} (Male, 50 years old) added that:

"Learners are generally shy and struggle to communicate in English".

Furthermore, Teacher B (Female, 44 years old) expressed:

"…*akukho lula* [it is not easy] *but siyazama* [we are trying] *that they speak in English so it's worse to share ideas in groups through English".*

Teachers said that they try to reinforce English speaking through round-monitoring in class; however, learners tend to keep quiet when this takes place, as they do not know where or how to start communicating.

Limited English Vocabulary

Another challenge that affects learners' English-speaking ability is having a limited vocabulary. Teacher B (Female, 44 years old) adds that

"…learners are not used to having a conversation with other people. They do not know which words to use. They do better only when they have memorised presentations".

Participants from School A emphasised that learners tend to do better with memorisation than with conversation, as they have a limited vocabulary. This finding means that learners in Grade 4 often struggle with speaking English during EFAL literacy classes because their performance almost solely depends on enforced memorisation instead of helping them speak fluently. Learners were also found not to be the only ones struggling with a limited vocabulary – the participating teachers highlighted having the same challenge. As SES^{1} (Female, 55 years old) noted:

"Lack of knowing a variety of English words would not enable them to speak fluently… because they are not adequately trained, an SGB teacher might not have been trained as a teacher".

SES^{2} (Male, 46 years old) further confirmed that teachers do often struggle with speaking English:

"…*we have teachers who are struggling in English speaking using isiXhosa in teaching"*

Thus, language difficulties experienced by individual teachers result in mother-tongue preference in the EFAL classroom.

Irregular Monitoring of Classroom Activities

Another challenge is classroom visits not being regularly conducted by the HoDs and/or SESs to ensure that teachers use English. As a result, teachers from both schools concluded that they only discuss EFAL issues in general with their HoDs, and do not address issues related to the LoLT specifically. Thus, it appears that both HoDs and SESs do not actively consider the value of classroom visits, nor do they offer adequate support in aiding teachers in adhering to the implementation of the LoLT. SES[1] (Female, 55 years old) also mentioned that teachers do have the liberty to use code-switching. In other words, the SES admitted to holding some of the blame for this challenge, as SESs are responsible for conducting classroom visits. SES[1] (Female, 55 years old) added:

> *"…sometimes we lack transport to go to schools."*

This statement highlighted a key consideration of measures to be implemented to solve the irregular classroom visits issue.

Discussion

In line with the analysis of the results presented in the previous section, it is evident that Grade 4 teachers at the selected primary schools utilise two languages – namely English and isiXhosa – in their EFAL literacy classrooms expressly because Grade 4 learners do not (yet) understand instructions in the LoLT. The participating teachers further confirmed that they often use vernacular to assist learning. As a result, code-switching occurs as a purposeful strategy for teachers to explain concepts to learners. According to Evans and Nthulana (2018), learners in Grade 4 struggle to master English because they have not yet mastered cognitive academic language proficiency in their home language. Such assertions align with an investigation conducted by Mweli in 2018, which revealed that Grade 4 teachers prefer using venacular because they experience challenges with using English in EFAL classrooms. Sa'ad and Usman (2014) similarly argue that using vernacular in English classrooms results in poor perfomance. Although the language policy of South Africa states explicitly that learners in Grade 4 – which forms part of schooling's 'transition phase' – should be taught in English, in most classroom environments, the mother tongue dominates.

Furthermore, findings indicate that teachers themselves lack proficiency in English, as they have limited access to opportunities to practice speaking the language, since they live and work in a rural setting where most people speak isiXhosa. This inability to effectively communicate in English does not only affect the teachers, but their learners as well. To compensate for this particular challenge, the participating teachers use code-switching. A study conducted by Evans and Nthulana (2018) similarly confirmed that Tshivenda-speaking teachers use code-switching technique when they lack English proficiency. Findings from a study conducted by Sibomana (2022) in Rwanda further highlight that transitioning from home language to English can be a challenge for 4th Grade teachers and also learners due to a general lack of English proficiency. Overly relying on code-switching in the EFAL classroom can be somewhat advantageous in improving learners' understanding of course content. However, a question can be raised on whether codeswitching improves overall proficiency (Galebole & Mothudi, 2022).

All participants also confirmed a lack confidence on the part of learners in expressing themselves in English. Teachers noted that their students are often shy and hindered by anxiety. In a bid to encourage learners to speak English, the participating teachers practised round-monitoring in the classroom. However, they found that learners tend to keep quiet during such monitoring as they do not know where or how to start communicating. As highlighted in the extant literature, anxiety often negatively impacts learners' speaking proficiency and the learning of foreign languages (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020; Wu & Kang, 2023). Aside from the noted challenges, other challenges that affect learners' English speaking ability include: limited vocabulary and performing better when required to memorise than when expected to communicate fluently. These challenges mean that learners in Grade 4 often struggle with speaking English during lessons, as their performance almost solely depends on enforced memorisation that does not necessarily aid in overall

proficiency or speaking. These findings echo rresults from the Namaziandost and Nasri (2019) study, which confirmed that students tend to obtain low marks in class assessments that require speaking.

The SESs who participated in the present study raised their concerns regarding learners not being the only ones who struggle with a limited vocabulary, and that teachers also face the same challenge. The result of teachers not having a large English vocabulary is that mother-tongue usage occurs far too often in the EFAL classroom. The fact that the learning environment should be seamlessly conducted using English is a challenge, therefore, as (other) teachers are not fluent in LoLT to promote such proficiency in their learners. Shilongo (2007) conducted a study in Namibia with the aim to better understand the challenges faced by 4th Grade teachers and also learners in transitioning from Oshikwanyama (vernacular) to English as the LOLT. Results of that study indicated that teachers often struggle to teach in English, and learners often do not understand instructions given in English. These findings align with those presented in this paper and confirm that educators and learners face the same predicament of being poorly equipped to speak English fluently. All these results attest to the problem of poor English proficiency that many non-English-speaking countries face. It is necessary, therefore, that these nations work together to find solutions to these unique challenges.

Conclusion

The study found that participating Grade 4 teachers who work at the selected primary schools use both English and isiXhosa in their EFAL literacy classrooms. Multifaceted challenges that impede the speaking of English in literacy classrooms were found, including lack of speaking confidence, limited vocabulary, and limited opportunities to practice speaking. These challenges affect both teachers and learners. Evidence from this study further suggests that 4th Grade teachers and learners at the selected primary schools have a generally limited proficiency in English, which, in turn, negatively impacts their ability to speak English in EFAL literacy classrooms and elsewhere. To address these noted challenges, the participating teachers have resorted to code-switching – using the practice as a resource to assist in teaching and learning. Although this strategy may provide some temporary aid, the long-term effects are negative, as code-switching does not result in proficiency. Therefore, teachers should minimise the use of code-switching at the Grade 4 level in their EFAL literacy classrooms so as not to further hinder and delay learners' understanding of course content and/or their overall proficiency in English. As such, the study recommends that strategies be developed to enhance English speaking skills particularly for those teaching Grade 4, since it forms part of learners' transition phase. This recommendation means, however, that the current language policies that declare English as a LOLT from Grade 4 must be revised, as the strategies presently employed in relation to the policy are failing to produce the desired results. Instead of code-switching, teachers should adopt the interactive hypothesis theory when designing lesson plans to better encourage dialogue and promote speaking. A final recommendation is that the Department of Education have to recruit qualified teachers proficient in the language to teach English to Grade 4 learners.

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