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Leveraging Code-Switching as a Pedagogical Tool: Enhancing Grade 4 Efal Learners' Comprehension and Engagement in the Vhembe Cluster

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Abstract

This study investigates how code-switching can be used as a pedagogical tool to enhance comprehension and classroom engagement among Grade 4 learners studying English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) in the Vhembe Cluster of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Many of these learners speak Tshivenda at home and experience difficulties when English becomes the medium of instruction from Grade 4. The lack of understanding and reduced participation in class often negatively affect their academic performance. The main aim of the study was to explore how Grade 4 EFAL teachers use code-switching in the classroom and to assess its impact on learners' understanding and participation. The research followed an interpretivist paradigm to explore the meanings and experiences of both teachers and learners. A qualitative case study design was used to allow in-depth investigation within real classroom contexts. The research employed qualitative methods. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The population included Grade 4 EFAL teachers and learners in the Vhembe Cluster. Using purposive sampling, six teachers from three rural schools were selected, along with 120 learners who were observed during EFAL lessons. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to the role of code-switching in supporting learning. The study was delimited to three schools in the Vhembe Cluster and focused on code-switching between English and Tshivenda in EFAL classrooms. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data, detailed contextual descriptions, a clear audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. Ethical clearance was obtained, and participants' confidentiality, consent, and right to withdraw were fully respected. The article found that code-switching helped learners better understand complex academic content by linking new knowledge to their home language. Code-switching also boost learner confidence and class participation by reducing language anxiety. However, the study also found that the use of code-switching is limited by a lack of teacher training, policy clarity, and bilingual materials. The study recommended that teacher training programmes incorporate code-switching pedagogy to equip teachers with the skills to use it effectively. Clear policy guidelines and bilingual teaching resources should be developed to support its implementation in rural multilingual classrooms. The study affirms that code-switching is a valid and effective teaching strategy that enhances learning in EFAL classrooms. Recognizing and supporting it through policy and training could help improve the academic success of multilingual learners in rural settings.

Keywords: *Batwa communities, Education access, Indigenous peoples, Critical pedagogy, Social alienation*

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1. Introduction

South Africa is a country with many languages, and it recognises eleven official languages. Even though most learners in rural areas, such as those in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, speak African languages like Tshivenda at home, English becomes the main language of teaching and learning from Grade 4 onwards. In the early grades (R to 3), learners are usually taught in their home language. However, from Grade 4, they are expected to learn all subjects in English, even though they are still learning to speak and understand it well.

This sudden change can be difficult for many learners. It can lead to poor understanding of the subject content, less participation in class, and low academic performance. Learners may also lose interest or feel less confident in their learning. To help learners, some teachers use code-switching, which means they switch between English and the learners' home language during lessons. This helps learners follow the lesson better, take part in classroom discussions, and understand the content more clearly.

Even though code-switching is commonly used in multilingual classrooms, especially in rural schools, there is little research about how it is used in Grade 4 EFAL (English First Additional Language) classrooms and how it affects learning. South Africa's education policy supports the use of more than one language in teaching (known as additive bilingualism), but teachers often do not receive enough training or support to apply this approach in their classrooms.

This study looks at how Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster use code-switching to support learning. It also explores whether code-switching helps learners understand better and stay more engaged. The aim is to show whether this strategy can be formally recognised in teaching policies and teacher training programmes.

Many Grade 4 learners in South Africa face learning challenges when English becomes the language of teaching, especially in rural areas like the Vhembe Cluster where learners speak Tshivenda at home. These learners often find it hard to understand lessons, take part in class activities, and perform well in school.

To address these challenges, some teachers use code-switching, but there is little research on how this is done in EFAL classrooms and whether it helps learners. Teachers also do not receive proper support or training on how to use code-switching effectively. As a result, the use of code-switching in classrooms is often informal and not fully guided by policy or training.

There is a need to better understand how code-switching is used in EFAL classrooms, how learners respond to it, and what role it can play in improving teaching and learning. This study aims to fill this gap, focusing on schools in the rural context of the Vhembe Cluster

The aim of this study is to explore how Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster use code-switching in their classrooms and to assess how this strategy supports learners' understanding and participation.

To achieve this aim, the article was guided by the following research questions:

* How do Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster use code-switching during classroom instruction?

* What are the learners' responses to the use of code-switching in EFAL classrooms?

* How does code-switching affect learners' understanding of lesson content?

* What challenges and benefits do teachers experience when using code-switching as a teaching strategy in EFAL classrooms?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning and Cummins' Theory of Linguistic Interdependence. These theories support the use of learners' home languages as a valuable resource when learning additional languages, such as English. Both frameworks help explain how code-switching can support comprehension and engagement in multilingual classrooms.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a social process that happens best when learners interact with others, especially when guided by a more knowledgeable person. He introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with help. In the context of this study, code-switching allows teachers to assist learners within their ZPD by explaining difficult content in both English and the home language, such as Tshivenda. This scaffolding helps learners build a deeper understanding of new concepts.

Using both English and Tshivenda in the classroom also helps learners participate more actively. When learners hear familiar language, they are more confident to ask questions, contribute to discussions, and interact with the teacher and their peers. This kind of active participation supports meaningful learning and creates an inclusive classroom environment—an important feature of Vygotsky's theory (Daniels, 2001).

Cummins' Theory of Linguistic Interdependence suggests that learners who have developed skills in their first language can transfer those skills when learning a second language (Cummins, 2000). This means that the better a learner understands and uses their home language, the easier it will be for them to learn English. In rural areas like the Vhembe Cluster, many learners enter Grade 4 with strong skills in Tshivenda. Code-switching allows teachers to build on these existing skills to support English language development.

Cummins (2008) also distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to everyday, conversational language, which learners often acquire quickly. CALP, on the other hand, involves the more complex, academic language needed for learning subjects like Science or Mathematics. Many Grade 4 learners may speak English socially (BICS) but still struggle with classroom content (CALP). By using code-switching, teachers can bridge this gap by explaining academic concepts using familiar terms in the home language.

Together, these two theories provide a strong foundation for this study. Vygotsky explains how learners benefit from learning support within social settings, while Cummins shows how skills in the first language help support second language learning. Both theories support the view that code-switching is not a sign of poor teaching but a useful and valid strategy in multilingual classrooms. This theoretical framework helps explain why code-switching may improve both comprehension and learner engagement in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms in the Vhembe Cluster.

3. Conceptualization of Code-switching Pedagogy in the Classroom

In this study, *code-switching pedagogy* is understood as the intentional and strategic use of both English and Tshivenda by teachers and learners during classroom instruction to support teaching and learning. This approach is based on the understanding that multilingual learners rely on all their language resources to understand new content, particularly when they are learning in a language that is not their mother tongue (Probyn, 2019). In Grade 4 EFAL classrooms in the Vhembe Cluster, code-switching is viewed not as a sign of weak language skills, but as a useful teaching strategy that helps learners connect their home language with academic English.

This view aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which states that learning happens best through interaction with others using language that learners understand. According to Vygotsky (1978), learners develop new knowledge within the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD)—the space between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with help. In this space, code-switching serves as a scaffold, where teachers explain new or complex ideas in Tshivenda to support learners' understanding of English content (Daniels, 2021).

The study draws on Cummins' Theory of Linguistic Interdependence, which argues that knowledge and skills in a learner's first language can support their learning in a second language (Cummins, 2000). This theory supports the idea that developing Tshivenda skills in the early grades can help learners succeed when English becomes the language of learning from Grade 4 onwards. Research by Setati and Dlamini (2020) also supports this view, showing that learners make better progress when teachers link new English concepts to familiar knowledge in the home language.

In practice, code-switching pedagogy includes translating key terms, giving instructions in both languages, and explaining difficult concepts in Tshivenda before returning to English. Teachers also allow learners to ask and answer questions in either language to ensure participation and understanding. These methods promote learner confidence, reduce anxiety, and create a more inclusive classroom environment (Heugh, 2022).

This article conceptualizes code-switching pedagogy as a flexible and inclusive teaching strategy that values learners' linguistic backgrounds while promoting English learning. It supports additive bilingualism by building on what learners already know in their home language, rather than replacing it. This approach is particularly important in under-resourced rural classrooms, where most learners face language barriers when they move from home language instruction to English-medium education.

4. Literature Review

In multilingual classrooms, where learners and teachers speak more than one language, code-switching has become a common practice to support teaching and learning. Code-switching refers to the use of two or more languages within a

single conversation or lesson. In South Africa, especially in rural areas such as the Vhembe District, many learners speak African languages like Tshivenda at home and face difficulties when English becomes the language of teaching from Grade 4 onwards. In multilingual classrooms within the Vhembe Cluster, teachers often switch between English and Tshivenda to help learners better understand lesson content and remain actively engaged. This practice, known as code-switching, plays a crucial role in supporting comprehension, particularly for learners who are still developing proficiency in English as a First Additional Language (EFAL). Understanding how code-switching functions as a pedagogical tool and how it supports learning is crucial for enhancing classroom practices in multilingual contexts.

This literature review provides an overview of key studies and theories related to the use of code-switching in multilingual education, with a focus on EFAL (English First Additional Language) classrooms. It begins by explaining what code-switching is and how it functions in multilingual contexts. It also examines language-in-education policies in South Africa, the role of code-switching in EFAL instruction, its impact on learner comprehension and participation, and the challenges teachers face in using this strategy. Reviewing this literature is important because it highlights what is already known about code-switching, identifies gaps in current research, and helps build a foundation for the current study, which investigates how code-switching is used to support Grade 4 EFAL learners in the Vhembe Cluster.

4.1. Understanding Code-switching in Multilingual Classrooms

Code-switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a conversation or communicative context (García and Wei, 2021). It is a natural linguistic phenomenon that occurs in many multilingual communities worldwide, including South Africa. In educational settings, code-switching refers to the deliberate or spontaneous use of multiple languages by teachers and learners during classroom instruction. It serves as a communicative tool to facilitate understanding, manage classroom discourse, and build relationships between teachers and learners (Sultana and Rahman, 2020).

There are different types of code-switching, with *intra-sentential* and *inter-sentential* being the most commonly discussed. Intra-sentential code-switching happens within a single sentence, where speakers switch languages mid-sentence without breaking grammatical rules (Auer, 2021). For example, a teacher might say, "Please open your *bugu* (book) now." Inter-sentential code-switching occurs at sentence boundaries, where the switch happens between complete sentences, such as, "Today we will learn about animals. *Hezwi ndi zwa vhutshilo* (This is about life)." Both types are frequently used by teachers to bridge language gaps in multilingual classrooms (Bhatt and Sarkar, 2022).

In South Africa, code-switching is especially relevant due to the country's rich linguistic diversity. The country has eleven official languages, and learners in many rural schools speak African languages at home, such as Tshivenda, isiZulu, or Sepedi. However, English is often introduced as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards (Pretorius and Machet, 2020). This sudden shift presents challenges for learners who are not yet fluent in English. As a result, code-switching emerges as a practical strategy that teachers use to support comprehension and participation in the classroom (Khumalo and Nyembezi, 2021).

Research shows that code-switching in multilingual classrooms helps learners connect new concepts taught in English to their existing knowledge in their home language (Mthethwa, 2019). It reduces cognitive load by allowing learners to process difficult academic content using familiar linguistic resources (Mphahlele and Moya, 2023). Code-switching creates a more inclusive classroom environment where learners feel culturally and linguistically acknowledged, thus improving motivation and engagement (Makhado and Mangena, 2022).

Despite its advantages, the use of code-switching in classrooms is not always formally supported by education policies or teacher training programs (Mosha, 2022). Many teachers use code-switching informally and intuitively rather than through explicit pedagogical planning. This can lead to inconsistent application and uncertainty about its role in language teaching (Swanepoel and de Wet, 2020). Nevertheless, growing evidence suggests that recognising and systematising code-switching practices could enhance multilingual education and support learners' bilingual development (Nkosi and Van der Walt, 2024).

Code-switching is an important communicative practice in multilingual classrooms that enables teachers to facilitate learning effectively. It allows teachers to switch between home languages and English to help learners understand content, participate actively, and feel included. Given South Africa's multilingual education context, understanding the forms and functions of code-switching is critical for developing effective teaching strategies that meet learners' linguistic and cognitive needs.

4.2. Language-in-education policy and multilingual education in South Africa

South Africa's language-in-education policies are grounded in the country's recognition of its rich linguistic diversity, which includes eleven official languages. The South African Schools Act (1996) and the National Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) (Department of Basic Education, 2019) provide a legal and policy framework that encourages the use of learners' home languages in the early years of schooling. According to these policies, learners should be taught in their mother tongue or home language from Grade R to Grade 3, before gradually transitioning to English or Afrikaans as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. This transition aligns with the principle of additive bilingualism, which promotes maintaining and developing the first language while acquiring a second language (Heugh, 2019).

Additive bilingualism is considered beneficial because it recognizes the importance of learners' home languages in supporting their cognitive and academic development. Research has shown that skills developed in the mother tongue, including literacy and critical thinking, can transfer positively to second language learning, helping learners to better understand content taught in English (Makalela, 2021). This approach aims to empower learners by valuing their linguistic backgrounds and preventing the marginalization of indigenous languages in education. It is especially relevant in multilingual countries like South Africa, where learners often speak African languages such as Tshivenda, isiZulu, or Sepedi at home, but face academic instruction predominantly in English.

Despite the progressive nature of South African language policies, the implementation of multilingual education faces significant challenges, particularly in rural areas such as the Vhembe Cluster. One major challenge is the lack of sufficient teacher training and professional development on how to effectively use home languages alongside English in the classroom (Mpofu and Mavhunga, 2020). Many teachers have limited knowledge or confidence in applying additive bilingual approaches, which results in inconsistent practices. Resource constraints, such as the shortage of teaching materials in African languages, further complicate the situation.

Another challenge is the dominant social and economic status of English, which influences language practices in schools. English is often perceived as the language of opportunity and success, leading to pressure on schools and parents to prioritize English instruction as early as possible (Ngcobo and Msila, 2022). This pressure can lead to premature language shifts where learners stop using their home language in educational settings, which contradicts policy recommendations for additive bilingualism. Consequently, many learners struggle with understanding academic content when taught only in English, particularly if they have not fully developed English proficiency by Grade 4.

The application of language policies varies widely across different regions and schools. While national policy supports the use of multiple languages, its implementation is uneven. In some rural schools, English-only instruction begins abruptly in Grade 4 without adequate support for learners' home languages (Ndhlovu, 2023). In contrast, other schools informally allow teachers to switch between English and home languages to assist comprehension, despite the lack of formal policy guidance on code-switching. This inconsistency creates confusion among educators and learners regarding language expectations and limits the effectiveness of multilingual education.

South Africa's language-in-education policies provide a valuable framework for promoting multilingualism and additive bilingualism in schools. However, systemic challenges such as insufficient teacher training, resource limitations, socio-economic pressures favouring English, and inconsistent policy implementation hinder the full realization of these goals, especially in rural contexts. Understanding these challenges is crucial for studies like the current one, which investigates how practical strategies such as code-switching can bridge policy intentions and classroom realities to support Grade 4 EFAL learners in multilingual environments.

4.3. The role of Code-switching in EFAL Classrooms

Code-switching plays a significant role in English First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms by helping learners overcome language barriers and better understand academic content. Teachers often alternate between English and learners' home languages during instruction to clarify difficult concepts, explain new vocabulary, and manage classroom interactions (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021). This bilingual communication strategy creates a supportive learning environment where learners can access content in English while still drawing on the familiar structure and vocabulary of their first language.

In EFAL classrooms, code-switching also enhances classroom communication. Teachers use it to give instructions, ask questions, and respond to learners in ways that ensure understanding and participation (Mabuza, 2020). This practice allows learners to feel included and confident because they are not restricted to using English alone, which may still be developing. When learners hear explanations or examples in their home language, they are more likely to engage actively and contribute to class discussions, fostering better interaction and collaboration (Molefe and Ramani, 2022).

Code-switching supports learner confidence and reduces anxiety associated with learning in a second language. Research indicates that learners are more willing to take risks and participate when they know their home language is valued and used in the classroom (Van der Merwe and Pretorius, 2019). This inclusive approach not only supports language development but also respects learners' cultural identities, which is crucial in multilingual contexts like South Africa.

International studies have similarly highlighted the pedagogical benefits of code-switching in additional language learning. Cummins (2021) emphasizes that strategic use of the home language alongside English strengthens conceptual understanding and cognitive processing. When teachers deliberately use code-switching as a planned instructional tool rather than an informal habit, learners can bridge linguistic gaps and achieve better academic outcomes. Thus, code-switching emerges as a practical and effective strategy to support EFAL learners' comprehension, communication, and confidence in multilingual classrooms.

4.4. Code-switching and Learner Comprehension and Engagement

Code-switching has been widely recognized as a valuable strategy that supports learners' comprehension and engagement, particularly during the critical transition to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4. At this stage, learners who are still developing proficiency in English often struggle to grasp complex academic content delivered exclusively in the second language. By alternating between English and the learners' home language, teachers can make lessons more accessible and meaningful, thereby enhancing understanding (Setati and Adler, 2020).

Research shows that code-switching helps clarify difficult concepts by allowing learners to relate new information to prior knowledge expressed in their first language (Goba and Ngcobo, 2021). For instance, when teachers explain scientific terms or mathematical procedures in both English and the home language, learners are better able to form connections and retain information. This bilingual approach reduces cognitive overload and lowers language barriers that might otherwise hinder learning.

Code-switching positively affects learner engagement. When learners understand the content more clearly, they become more confident and willing to participate in classroom activities such as discussions, group work, and question-answer sessions (Muthusamy and Seegobin, 2019). The use of the home language also creates a more inclusive classroom environment where learners feel valued and comfortable expressing their ideas without fear of making language mistakes. This supportive atmosphere encourages active participation and interaction, which are crucial for language development and academic success.

In the South African context, studies have documented how code-switching fosters engagement and comprehension in multilingual classrooms. For example, Chisholm *et al.* (2023) found that learners in Grade 4 classrooms where code-switching was used reported better understanding of lesson content and greater enthusiasm for learning English. The researchers concluded that code-switching bridges the gap between learners' existing linguistic resources and the demands of the curriculum, promoting both cognitive and affective aspects of learning.

Overall, code-switching serves as a practical pedagogical tool that not only supports comprehension of lesson content but also enhances learner engagement. Its strategic use during the transition to English-medium instruction can help address language-related challenges faced by Grade 4 learners, making classroom learning more effective and inclusive.

4.5. Challenges and Teacher Experiences in Implementing Code-switching

While code-switching is recognized as an effective strategy in multilingual classrooms, many teachers face significant challenges when trying to implement it, especially in under-resourced rural areas such as the Vhembe Cluster. One of the main challenges is the lack of formal training and professional development focused on how to use code-switching strategically and effectively in teaching. Studies show that many teachers rely on code-switching as an informal or intuitive practice rather than a planned pedagogical tool (Mahlangu and Mokoena, 2020). This lack of guidance can limit the potential benefits of code-switching and lead to inconsistent use in classrooms.

Another challenge is the mixed perceptions about the role of code-switching in language learning. Some educators and policy-makers view code-switching negatively, considering it a sign of poor language proficiency or a barrier to learning English (Phasha and Moonsamy, 2021). Such attitudes discourage teachers from using code-switching openly or integrating it systematically into their lesson plans. This tension between policy ideals, which promote additive bilingualism, and actual classroom practices creates confusion for teachers and affects their confidence in employing code-switching as a legitimate teaching method.

The absence of clear policy guidelines on code-switching further complicates the situation. South African language-in-education policies support the use of multiple languages, but they do not provide explicit instructions on how and when code-switching should be used in the classroom (Nxumalo and Ndhlovu, 2022). This policy gap leaves teachers to interpret and apply code-switching based on their own experiences and beliefs, which can vary widely. In rural schools with limited resources, such as insufficient teaching materials in indigenous languages or large class sizes, teachers struggle to balance language needs while delivering the curriculum effectively.

Practical challenges such as heavy workloads, lack of support from school management, and pressure to meet standardized assessment requirements in English hinder teachers' ability to use code-switching optimally (Dube and Moloi, 2023). These factors contribute to teacher burnout and limit opportunities for reflective practice and professional growth related to multilingual pedagogy.

Despite these challenges, many teachers in rural settings continue to use code-switching creatively to support learner comprehension and participation. Their experiences highlight the need for comprehensive teacher training, supportive policy frameworks, and adequate resources to maximize the benefits of code-switching. Recognizing and addressing these practical realities is essential to strengthening multilingual education in contexts like the Vhembe Cluster.

The literature shows that code-switching is an important and useful strategy in multilingual classrooms, especially in South African EFAL settings where learners switch to English as the main language of teaching. Code-switching helps improve learners' understanding, supports better communication in class, and boosts learners' confidence and participation. Although South African education policies support using multiple languages in teaching, it is still hard to put these policies into practice in rural areas like the Vhembe Cluster because teachers often do not get enough training and there are no clear guidelines. Teachers find both advantages and difficulties when using code-switching, such as lack of resources and mixed opinions about its value. This review highlights the need for better policy support, teacher training, and more research to fully use code-switching as an effective teaching tool in EFAL classrooms.

5. Methodology

This study is guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding how individuals experience and interpret their social world (Creswell, 2019). This approach is suitable because it emphasizes the meanings that Grade 4 EFAL teachers and learners attach to code-switching during classroom interactions in multilingual settings such as the Vhembe Cluster. The interpretivist framework allows the researcher to explore the subjective experiences of participants, giving insight into how code-switching is used as a pedagogical tool.

A qualitative case study design was employed to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of code-switching in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms. Case studies are valuable for examining complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). This design enabled close focus on three primary schools in the Vhembe Cluster, offering rich data on the use and impact of code-switching from the perspectives of both teachers and learners.

Qualitative methods were used to collect detailed and descriptive data. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with six Grade 4 EFAL teachers to explore their beliefs, strategies, and challenges in using code-switching during lessons. Classroom observations were conducted to witness teaching practices and learners' reactions to code-switching in real time, providing direct evidence of how it supports comprehension and engagement. Document analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials was carried out to understand how code-switching is planned and integrated into classroom instruction.

The population consisted of Grade 4 EFAL teachers and learners in the Vhembe Cluster, Limpopo Province. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants who actively use code-switching and represent rural multilingual classrooms (Patton, 2015). The final sample included six teachers from three schools and 120 learners whose classroom engagement was observed.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures, where interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were carefully reviewed to identify patterns and themes. These themes related to the use of code-switching, its influence on learner comprehension and engagement, and the challenges teachers face. Coding and categorization helped organize the data to draw meaningful conclusions.

The study was limited to Grade 4 classrooms in three primary schools in the Vhembe Cluster and focused only on code-switching between English and Tshivenda during EFAL teaching. Therefore, the findings might not be generalizable to other grades, subjects, or language contexts beyond this rural, multilingual setting.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed several strategies. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, documents) and prolonged engagement in the field. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the context and participants. Dependability was supported by keeping a clear audit trail of the research process, while confirmability was ensured by reflecting on researcher bias and grounding findings firmly in the data.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities before data collection. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided voluntary informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing data. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

6. Presentation of Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study on how code-switching is used as a pedagogical tool to enhance comprehension and learner engagement in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms in the Vhembe Cluster. The findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews with EFAL teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis. The aim is to explore not only how code-switching is applied in practice but also how it is experienced and understood by teachers and learners in a rural multilingual context.

The discussion is organised around four main themes that emerged during data analysis. These themes reflect the role of code-switching in supporting learner understanding, promoting participation, revealing teacher strategies and beliefs, and highlighting the challenges encountered in rural classroom settings. The themes are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Cummins' Theory of Linguistic Interdependence, as well as relevant literature. Together, these findings provide a deeper understanding of how code-switching functions in EFAL teaching and what implications it has for classroom practice, teacher training, and language policy in multilingual education.

6.1. Theme 1: Code-switching as a Tool for Enhancing Comprehension

One of the central findings of the study is that teachers intentionally use code-switching as a strategy to enhance learner comprehension in EFAL classrooms. Teachers reported that switching from English to Tshivenda during lessons helped learners grasp complex academic content, especially when learners were unfamiliar with new vocabulary or concepts presented in English.

6.1.1. A Grade 4 EFAL Teacher from School a Remarked

"When I teach in English only, many learners just stare at me. But when I explain in Tshivenda, I can see that their eyes light up, and they begin to understand. I use Tshivenda to clarify difficult words and explain what the topic means."

This response reflects Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with support. In this case, code-switching serves as a scaffolding tool that enables learners to access new knowledge by building on what they already understand in their home language. By clarifying meaning and translating complex content into Tshivenda, teachers help learners navigate the ZPD more effectively (Daniels, 2001).

6.1.2. Another Teacher Commented

"Sometimes I start by explaining in English, but when I see confusion, I quickly give an example or translate into Tshivenda. They nod and continue to follow. It helps them not to be left behind."

This supports Cummins' (2000) Theory of Linguistic Interdependence, which posits that the knowledge and skills developed in a learner's first language can support their acquisition of a second language. In this case, learners' understanding of concepts in Tshivenda forms a bridge to academic English, reinforcing Cummins' argument that first language development strengthens second language learning. This aligns with Heugh (2021), who affirms that the home language is a valuable cognitive resource and can support deeper content understanding in multilingual classrooms.

6.1.3. One Participant Added

"When I use Tshivenda to explain things like 'photosynthesis' or 'evaporation,' learners quickly relate it to what they know. It's not about abandoning English but helping them understand it better."

This aligns with research by Setati and Barwell ([2020](#)), who argue that code-switching is not a sign of weak English instruction but a pedagogical strategy that enables learners to engage with academic content meaningfully. Rather than confusing learners, strategic code-switching promotes comprehension and inclusion by acknowledging the linguistic realities of the classroom.

Therefore, this theme demonstrates that code-switching is used by teachers as a deliberate instructional method to clarify, reinforce, and contextualise new content, particularly when learners face barriers due to limited English proficiency. Grounded in both Vygotsky's and Cummins' theories, these practices highlight how linguistic mediation through the home language supports learners' cognitive development and subject understanding, especially during the critical transition to English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4.

6.2. Theme 2: Code-switching and Learner Participation

Findings from the study revealed that code-switching plays a significant role in increasing learner participation in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms. Teachers observed that when Tshivenda was used alongside English during instruction, learners became more confident, engaged, and willing to take part in classroom activities. This theme highlights how the inclusion of the home language can create a more welcoming learning environment that encourages active learner involvement.

6.2.1. A Teacher from School B Stated

"When I use English only, the learners become quiet and unsure. But when I switch to Tshivenda, they quickly raise their hands and respond. They feel comfortable, like the lesson belongs to them."

This observation resonates strongly with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises the social nature of learning. According to Vygotsky ([1978](#)), meaningful learning occurs when learners are actively involved in dialogue and interaction. Code-switching facilitates this interaction by reducing linguistic barriers, thus enabling learners to express themselves more freely and confidently within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) ([Daniels, 2001](#)). By using Tshivenda strategically, teachers create a socially supportive space that fosters learner confidence and participation.

6.2.2. Another Teacher Commented

"Some learners are shy to speak English because they are afraid of making mistakes. But when I say something in Tshivenda, they laugh, relax, and even volunteer answers. It brings them closer to the lesson."

This supports the idea that code-switching reduces language anxiety, which can otherwise hinder participation and learning. As noted by Cummins ([2008](#)), learners often acquire Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) more quickly than Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Without sufficient CALP in English, learners may feel excluded from lesson discussions. However, when familiar linguistic resources are incorporated through code-switching, learners can participate meaningfully, building both confidence and academic language gradually ([Cummins, 2000](#)).

6.2.3. A Further Insight Came from a Classroom Observation

During a group reading activity, the teacher switched to Tshivenda to explain a difficult passage. Immediately, several learners began to engage with the text and share their ideas. One learner, who had been quiet earlier, confidently contributed to English after the explanation.

This aligns with Setati and Barwell's (2020) assertion that multilingual learners perform better when teaching strategies respect and include their linguistic identities. The use of Tshivenda does not replace English but acts as a bridge to deeper understanding and increased participation. The evidence shows that learners engage more freely when they feel understood and respected in their own language, making the classroom more inclusive and participatory.

Code-switching enhances learner participation by creating an emotionally supportive environment, reducing fear of failure, and encouraging active involvement in learning tasks. Drawing from both Vygotsky's and Cummins' theories, this theme demonstrates that using the home language alongside English is a powerful way to promote engagement, particularly in contexts where learners are still developing proficiency in the language of instruction.

6.3. Theme 3: Teacher Strategies and Beliefs About Code-switching

This theme highlights how Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster use code-switching in various ways and what they believe about its role in teaching and learning. The findings show that teachers do not use code-switching randomly; instead, they apply it deliberately to meet specific learning needs, such as explaining difficult vocabulary, checking understanding, and managing classroom behaviour. Teachers also shared mixed feelings about code-switching, while most saw it as an effective and necessary strategy in multilingual classrooms, others expressed concerns about relying on it too much or not having enough guidance from policy or training.

6.3.1. One Teacher Explained

"I use code-switching when I see that learners do not understand a new word or instruction. I explain it in Tshivenda, and then I go back to English. It helps them to catch up quickly."

This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). By switching to Tshivenda temporarily, the teacher provides a scaffold that supports learners as they build understanding. Once learners grasp the concept, the teacher shifts back to English, promoting gradual language development. The teacher's strategy reflects purposeful, learner-centred pedagogy, showing that code-switching can be used as a tool for guided learning, not just language replacement.

6.3.2. Another Teacher Mentioned

"I believe code-switching is helpful, especially when teaching difficult subjects like Natural Science. But I worry that if I do it too much, the learners will not improve their English."

This concern highlights a tension between practice and policy, often found in multilingual classrooms. According to Cummins (2000), teachers sometimes feel pressure to focus only on English, even when it may hinder comprehension. This fear stems from the belief that home language use might slow second language acquisition. However, Cummins' Theory of Linguistic Interdependence suggests that first language skills can support English learning, rather than harm it, especially when teachers use code-switching intentionally to build academic language (Cummins, 2008).

Teachers also shared that their code-switching practices were influenced by their own comfort levels with English, availability of resources, and the linguistic backgrounds of learners. One participant said:

"We did not get training on how to teach using two languages. We just do what we think works best for our learners."

This reflects the practical challenges faced by teachers in rural contexts. As Setati and Barwell (2020) note, many South African teachers rely on personal experience and intuition when navigating multilingual instruction due to limited professional development and unclear policy guidance. While their strategies are often effective, there is a clear need for formal recognition and training to help teachers use code-switching more confidently and purposefully.

This theme shows that teachers in the Vhembe Cluster use code-switching thoughtfully, mainly to support comprehension and learner engagement. Their beliefs are shaped by practical classroom realities, language ideologies, and a lack of clear institutional support. The findings reinforce the need to legitimise code-switching through teacher training, resource development, and supportive language-in-education policies, so that teachers are empowered to use this strategy effectively in multilingual classrooms.

6.4. Theme 4: Challenges in Implementing Code-switching in Rural Classrooms

This theme presents the various challenges Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster face when using code-switching in their classrooms. While teachers acknowledge the benefits of code-switching in supporting learner comprehension and engagement, they also highlighted several barriers that make it difficult to implement this strategy effectively. These include the absence of formal training, conflicting education policies, limited bilingual resources, and negative perceptions from parents and school officials.

6.4.1. One Teacher Shared

"We were never trained on how to use two languages in one lesson. We just do what we think will help learners. Sometimes we are even told not to speak Tshivenda too much in class."

This reflects the lack of professional development focused on multilingual teaching strategies, a concern echoed by Probyn (2023), who notes that many South African teachers receive little to no training on how to integrate home languages meaningfully into English-medium instruction. Teachers often rely on their own experience or informal strategies, which can vary in effectiveness and consistency.

Another challenge is the confusion created by education policies that promote additive bilingualism on paper but do not provide clear guidelines for classroom implementation. One participant noted:

"The policy says we can use the home language, but there is no direction. It feels like we are doing something wrong when we switch languages."

This observation aligns with Heugh (2021), who argues that the South African Language-in-Education Policy lacks practical support structures for implementation, especially in rural areas. Teachers are caught between the expectation to teach in English and the reality that many learners struggle to understand it, particularly at the point of transition in Grade 4.

Another practical issue teachers mentioned was the shortage of bilingual teaching materials. As one teacher explained:

"Most textbooks and worksheets are only in English. If I want to explain in Tshivenda, I must do it myself. There are no materials to support that."

This lack of appropriate resources undermines teachers' efforts to scaffold learning in both languages. According to Ndhlovu and Mkhize (2019), resource limitations are a major obstacle in multilingual education, particularly in under-resourced rural schools where both English and African languages are under-supported in teaching materials.

Lastly, teachers discussed negative attitudes from some parents and stakeholders, who believe that code-switching weakens learners' English development. One participant shared:

"Some parents say we must only use English, because they think Tshivenda will hold their children back. They don't understand that we are trying to help."

This misconception reflects broader societal ideologies that privilege English over indigenous languages, despite research showing that home language support enhances second language acquisition (Cummins, 2008). These attitudes can discourage teachers from openly using code-switching, even when they see its value.

While teachers recognise the importance of code-switching for learner support, they face significant implementation barriers in rural settings. These include a lack of training, policy ambiguity, resource shortages, and social stigma. Addressing these challenges requires clearer policy direction, teacher development programmes, and greater community awareness of the benefits of bilingual instruction.

The findings of this study highlight that code-switching is a valuable pedagogical tool in Grade 4 EFAL classrooms, particularly within multilingual and rural contexts like the Vhembe Cluster. Teachers use code-switching purposefully to enhance comprehension by translating difficult academic concepts and building on learners' prior linguistic knowledge. This approach helps bridge the gap between home language and English, enabling learners to make meaningful connections with the content. The use of Tshivenda in classroom discussions fosters greater learner participation, boosts confidence, and creates an inclusive environment where learners feel more comfortable expressing themselves. Teachers' strategies and beliefs around code-switching vary, shaped by their training, experience, and perceptions of its benefits and limitations. However, despite its advantages, the implementation of code-switching faces numerous challenges, including insufficient training, policy ambiguity, a lack of bilingual teaching resources, and societal misconceptions about its value. These findings underscore the urgent need for supportive policies, targeted teacher development, and increased awareness among stakeholders to fully harness the potential of code-switching in enhancing teaching and learning in EFAL classrooms.

7. Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that code-switching is a valuable pedagogical tool that enhances learner comprehension and engagement, particularly in multilingual classrooms such as those in the Vhembe Cluster. To support the effective use of this strategy, it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education and teacher training institutions integrate code-switching into professional development programmes. Such training would equip teachers with the practical skills needed to use learners' home languages, like Tshivenda, purposefully and confidently when teaching EFAL. Without this support, many teachers remain uncertain or hesitant about using code-switching, even when it could benefit their learners.

There is also a need for the development of bilingual teaching and learning materials that combine English with learners' home languages. These resources can serve as structured tools that assist teachers in delivering lessons that are both accessible and academically rigorous. Having materials that reflect both languages can also reduce the reliance on spontaneous translation and help formalise the practice of code-switching in the classroom.

Another important recommendation is the clarification of education policy regarding multilingual instruction. Although South African education policy supports additive bilingualism, there remains ambiguity around how this should be implemented in everyday classroom practice. Developing clear guidelines that affirm code-switching as a valid and effective teaching approach will help teachers apply it with greater confidence and consistency.

Raising awareness among key stakeholders is also essential. Parents, school managers, and education officials must understand that code-switching is not a sign of weak English instruction but a legitimate strategy that bridges language gaps and supports learning. Advocacy efforts and information-sharing can help change negative perceptions and encourage the broader acceptance of multilingual pedagogies that are inclusive and responsive to learners' linguistic realities.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how teachers use code-switching to help Grade 4 EFAL learners in the Vhembe Cluster understand lessons better and take part more actively in class. The learners in this area speak Tshivenda at home but must learn in English from Grade 4, which can be difficult. The findings show that when teachers switch between English and Tshivenda in the classroom, it helps learners understand the content more clearly, ask questions, and feel more confident. Code-switching is especially helpful when learners are still adjusting to learning in English.

The study also found that although teachers see code-switching as helpful, they face challenges. These include not having enough training on how to use it effectively, a lack of clear policy support, and not having enough teaching materials in both languages. Some parents and school leaders also believe that using the home language in class may weaken learners' English skills, which affects how freely teachers use this method. Still, in many rural schools, code-switching is a practical way to support learners who are struggling.

This article shows that code-switching is not a problem or weakness, but a useful teaching tool in multilingual classrooms. It should be accepted and supported through teacher training and education policy. This would help teachers use it more effectively and give learners a better chance of success in EFAL. More research, training, and support are needed to strengthen multilingual teaching and make learning more inclusive for all children.

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