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From Playground to Classroom: Contextual Differences in Language Use among Grade 1 Learners

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Abstract

This study explored how Grade 1 learners use language differently in informal playground settings and formal classroom contexts. The problem addressed is that many young learners struggle to adjust their speech according to social contexts, which affects communication, participation, and academic development. Guided by a sociocultural research paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. The method used included naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews with learners and teachers. Data were collected from three primary schools in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The population comprised Grade 1 learners and their teachers, while purposive sampling was used to select six teachers and thirty learners. The collected data were thematically analysed to identify contextual patterns in language use. The study was delimited to Grade 1 learners within the Vhembe District. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and thick description. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The article found that learners exhibited clear awareness of situational appropriateness by using informal, playful language on the playground and formal, teacher-directed speech in the classroom. Teachers played a crucial mediating role in helping learners transition between these linguistic registers. The article recommends integrating contextual language awareness activities into early literacy lessons and providing teacher training on supporting learners' language adjustment across different settings. The paper highlights that building pragmatic language skills from Grade 1 fosters communicative competence and strengthens learners' social and academic interactions.

Keywords: *Language variation, Pragmatics, Classroom discourse, Sociocultural learning, Early childhood education*

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1. Introduction

Language is a central component of children's cognitive, social, and academic development, shaping how they communicate, interact, and learn within different contexts. In the early years of schooling, particularly in Grade 1, children begin to recognise that the language they use in informal social settings, such as the playground, differs

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significantly from the structured and rule-bound language expected in formal classroom environments (Thomas, 2020). This linguistic differentiation reflects not only cognitive and communicative maturity but also children's developing understanding of social norms and situational appropriateness. However, this transition is not always seamless. Many learners in the early grades struggle to adjust their speech according to context, leading to communication difficulties, reduced classroom participation, and challenges in meeting academic expectations.

During the first year of schooling, learners are exposed to a variety of communicative situations that require them to shift between informal and formal registers. On the playground, language is often expressive, creative, and peer-oriented, allowing children to negotiate friendships and roles through playful exchanges. Conversely, classroom discourse demands structured turn-taking, politeness, and adherence to academic conventions (Mercer and Littleton, 2021). In multilingual and culturally diverse contexts such as South Africa's Vhembe District, these shifts are further complicated by the coexistence of home languages and the language of learning and teaching (Nkosi, 2023). Understanding how young learners navigate these linguistic transitions is therefore critical for both teachers and curriculum developers aiming to enhance communication and literacy outcomes in the Foundation Phase.

Despite growing recognition of the role of context in shaping children's language use, there remains limited empirical research within South African early childhood education that examines how learners differentiate between informal and formal speech contexts. Learners who fail to adjust to classroom language norms often carry playground linguistic patterns into academic discussions, which may disrupt lesson flow, hinder comprehension, and reduce teacher-learner rapport. The problem addressed in this study is that many Grade 1 learners in the Vhembe District experience difficulties adapting their language use according to setting, which affects both their social and academic development.

The present study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which views language as a mediating tool in cognitive and social development. According to Vygotsky, children's linguistic competence emerges through social interaction, where meaning is co-constructed in contextually rich environments (Bodrova and Leong, 2019). Within this theoretical lens, the playground and classroom represent distinct yet complementary contexts for linguistic and social learning. While the playground offers opportunities for spontaneous, peer-mediated communication, the classroom provides structured, teacher-guided discourse that reinforces academic and pragmatic language skills. Understanding how children transition between these settings can offer valuable insights into language development and inform pedagogical strategies for promoting contextual language awareness.

The aim of this study is to explore how Grade 1 learners use language differently in playground and classroom contexts. To achieve this aim, the study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Grade 1 learners use language differently on the playground and in the classroom?
2. What factors influence learners' adjustment of language according to context?
3. How do teachers support learners in differentiating between informal and formal language use?
4. What strategies can enhance learners' contextual awareness in early learning environments?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic context shapes early communicative competence and academic readiness. It further underscores the importance of teacher mediation in scaffolding learners' transitions between social and academic registers. Ultimately, developing contextual language awareness from Grade 1 not only supports literacy acquisition but also fosters learners' confidence, adaptability, and social inclusion within educational environments (Mentz and Prinsloo, 2022).

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, which posits that learning and language development occur through social interaction and are mediated by cultural tools, particularly language (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, children construct knowledge through participation in meaningful social activities, guided by more knowledgeable others such as teachers and peers. Language serves as both a communicative tool and a cognitive instrument that enables learners to internalise social norms and academic concepts. Within the context of this study, the playground and classroom represent distinct sociocultural spaces that shape learners' linguistic behavior differently.

In the playground setting, learners engage in spontaneous, peer-directed communication that allows for experimentation with informal language forms, humour, and social negotiation. These interactions contribute to the

development of pragmatic competence—understanding how language functions in diverse contexts. Conversely, in the classroom, language is used within structured, rule-governed contexts emphasising clarity, politeness, and academic discourse. According to Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the teacher acts as a mediator who scaffolds learners’ ability to shift from informal to formal registers through modelling, questioning, and feedback (Daniels, 2020). Through this guided interaction, learners gradually internalise the appropriate linguistic norms expected in formal educational contexts.

The study also draws on Halliday’s Functional Linguistics, which emphasises that language varies according to field, tenor, and mode—essentially, what is being talked about, who is involved, and how communication occurs (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Applying this framework, the differences between playground and classroom language use can be understood as functional adaptations to changing social roles and communicative purposes. Grade 1 learners learn to differentiate between playful, peer-oriented talk and academic, teacher-directed discourse, reflecting the influence of situational context on language choice.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory provides a complementary perspective by situating language use within nested social environments, from immediate contexts (microsystems such as playgrounds and classrooms) to broader cultural influences (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This ecological lens highlights that children’s language practices are shaped not only by direct interactions but also by cultural norms, multilingual realities, and institutional expectations within the South African educational system.

The theoretical framework integrates sociocultural, functional, and ecological perspectives to explain how Grade 1 learners’ language use differs across contexts. It emphasises that contextual language competence develops through social mediation, exposure to diverse communicative settings, and active teacher guidance, processes central to early childhood education and literacy development.

1.2. Conceptualization: Contextual Language Use

Contextual language use refers to the ability of individuals, particularly young learners, to modify their linguistic behavior according to the communicative situation, audience, purpose, and setting. It encompasses pragmatic competence, the understanding that language varies depending on social norms, power relations, and communicative goals (Thomas, 2020). In early childhood education, contextual language use reflects a child’s capacity to distinguish between informal, peer-oriented talk and formal, instructional discourse. This adaptability is essential for developing both social and academic communication skills, which underpin classroom participation, comprehension, and collaboration (Mercer and Littleton, 2021).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is not a fixed system but a dynamic social practice that changes with context. Children learn that certain words, tones, and speech patterns are acceptable in one environment (e.g., playground) but may be inappropriate in another (e.g., classroom). This process, known as register variation, develops through repeated exposure to different communicative environments and guided social interaction (Gumperz, 1982; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). For instance, on the playground, learners may use colloquial expressions and informal sentence structures that reflect solidarity and playfulness, whereas in the classroom, they are expected to employ formal, polite, and structured language aligned with academic discourse.

In multilingual contexts such as South Africa, contextual language use extends beyond formality to include language choice and code-switching. Learners navigate multiple linguistic repertoires, home languages, local dialects, and the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) to achieve effective communication (Nkosi, 2023). This navigation demonstrates both linguistic flexibility and sociocultural awareness. Developing contextual language competence thus requires not only linguistic knowledge but also sensitivity to the expectations and norms of each communicative setting.

Within this study, the concept of contextual language use is central because it captures how Grade 1 learners negotiate linguistic boundaries between playground and classroom settings. It provides a lens through which to understand how children interpret social cues and modify speech accordingly. By observing learners’ interactions in these two spaces, the study investigates how contextual awareness develops, how teachers scaffold this transition, and how such awareness supports learners’ communicative competence and academic engagement. Ultimately, contextual language use in this research reflects the intersection between social experience, cognitive development, and linguistic adaptation—key processes in early childhood learning.

2. Literature Review

Understanding how Grade 1 learners adjust their language between playground and classroom contexts is crucial for supporting both social and academic development. Literature on early childhood pragmatics highlights that children's ability to use language appropriately across settings reflects growing communicative competence. This review examines existing studies on pragmatic development, play-based language use, classroom discourse, teacher mediation, and multilingual influences to situate the present research within broader educational contexts.

2.1. *Pragmatic Development in Early Childhood*

Pragmatic development, which concerns the ability to use language appropriately across social contexts, is a critical aspect of early childhood communication. It encompasses understanding conversational rules, turn-taking, politeness strategies, and contextual appropriateness. In the early years, children begin to internalise that language use varies according to audience and purpose. According to Thomas (2020), by approximately age six, learners develop metapragmatic awareness, the capacity to reflect on language and understand that different situations demand different communicative behaviors. This awareness is fundamental to the transition from informal peer-based language to formal, instructional language in the classroom.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a useful lens for understanding this development, suggesting that children acquire pragmatic competence through socially mediated interactions. As Rogoff (2021) explains, pragmatic skills emerge as children participate in joint activities that require them to negotiate meaning, respond to feedback, and adjust speech to others' expectations. The playground, therefore, serves as a microcosm of social communication, allowing learners to experiment freely with various linguistic registers. In contrast, the classroom context introduces norms of institutional discourse, such as politeness, formality, and structured turn-taking that require explicit teaching and modelling by adults.

Research indicates that pragmatic competence directly influences academic and social outcomes. Rao and Norbury (2020) found that children with limited pragmatic awareness often experience difficulties in comprehension, group participation, and task engagement, as they fail to recognise the language demands of formal learning settings. Similarly, Dore and Carter (2022) assert that pragmatic flexibility, switching between informal and formal registers is closely linked to cognitive flexibility, a skill essential for problem-solving and literacy development. Consequently, the early years of schooling represent a pivotal stage for fostering pragmatic awareness, particularly in multilingual and multicultural environments where norms of language use may differ widely.

In South African classrooms, the interplay between home languages and the language of instruction complicates pragmatic learning further. Learners must not only distinguish between play and school contexts but also between linguistic systems and cultural expectations associated with each. Developing this adaptive competence thus requires both natural social interaction and deliberate pedagogical intervention. As Thomas (2020) emphasises, pragmatic development is not automatic; it depends on sustained scaffolding from teachers and peers within meaningful communicative contexts.

2.2. *The Role of Play in Language Development*

Play is a fundamental context for linguistic and cognitive growth, providing opportunities for learners to use language creatively, negotiate roles, and construct shared meanings. According to Bodrova and Leong (2019), play enables children to explore different social roles and communicative patterns, laying the foundation for later mastery of formal language structures. Through play, learners acquire pragmatic skills such as turn-taking, topic maintenance, and the interpretation of nonverbal cues, all of which are crucial for effective communication in both informal and academic settings.

From a sociocultural perspective, play represents a zone of proximal development in which learners co-construct meaning through peer interaction and symbolic use of language. Vygotsky's theory, as interpreted by Fleer (2021), suggests that during imaginative play, children internalise social rules and linguistic norms by simulating real-life communication scenarios. For example, when learners engage in role-play games such as "teacher and student" or "shopkeeper and customer," they naturally shift between conversational tones and registers, demonstrating early awareness of contextual language use. This process nurtures metalinguistic awareness, helping learners recognise that the formality or informality of language depends on social context.

Empirical studies underscore the linguistic value of play-based learning. Weisberg *et al.* (2020) found that children who participate in structured pretend play activities exhibit higher expressive vocabulary and pragmatic competence than those engaged solely in teacher-directed tasks. Similarly, Mentz and Prinsloo (2022) observed that South African learners who experienced play-integrated instruction demonstrated improved discourse management and social interaction skills. Such findings highlight that play is not merely recreational but also an essential pedagogical tool that supports holistic language development.

In multilingual environments like the Vhembe District, play offers a space for code-switching and translanguaging, allowing learners to draw from their full linguistic repertoire. This process facilitates not only identity expression but also cognitive and communicative flexibility. However, as Nkosi (2023) cautions, without guided teacher intervention, learners may struggle to transfer playground-based language practices into formal academic communication. Therefore, teachers must strategically link play and instruction, using playful dialogue as a bridge between informal and formal language registers. Integrating play into the early literacy curriculum supports learners' pragmatic awareness and enhances their ability to communicate appropriately across contexts.

The reviewed literature reveals that contextual language use is shaped by social interaction, teacher guidance, and multilingual dynamics. While learners naturally experiment with language through play, they require structured support to master formal classroom discourse. Strengthening teacher-led scaffolding and integrating contextual language awareness into early literacy instruction can bridge the gap between informal and academic communication in Grade 1 learners.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded within a sociocultural paradigm, which underscores the notion that language development is inherently shaped by social interaction and context-specific engagement. The adoption of this paradigm is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that children acquire language through active participation in socially meaningful activities, wherein communication functions as both a cognitive and cultural instrument. This theoretical orientation was particularly pertinent for examining how Grade 1 learners in the Vhembe District negotiate the linguistic transition between the informal communicative practices characteristic of playground interactions and the structured, formal language expected in classroom contexts.

A qualitative case study design was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of learners' language use within their natural environments. The case study approach enables the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences by focusing on the meanings they attribute to their communicative actions within specific contexts (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This design was well-suited for capturing the fluid and situational nature of language use among young learners. The research was conducted in three purposively selected primary schools in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study population consisted of Grade 1 learners and their teachers, while the final sample comprised thirty learners and six teachers. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants who were actively engaged in both playground and classroom interactions, thereby yielding rich and contextually grounded linguistic data.

Data collection was undertaken through naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations documented learners' spontaneous language use during playtime and formal instructional activities, thereby capturing authentic communicative behavior in contrasting social contexts. Complementarily, semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners elicited participants' reflections on language variation and their awareness of contextual appropriateness. The integration of these methods enabled the generation of both descriptive and interpretive data, enhancing the depth and reliability of the findings. Data were collected over a six-week period to ensure consistency and analytical saturation (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework, encompassing familiarisation with data, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and interpretation. This analytic process facilitated the identification of recurrent linguistic patterns and the exploration of learners' awareness of situational language use. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as data triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were implemented. Triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings by corroborating data from multiple sources, while peer debriefing ensured critical evaluation of interpretations.

All ethical considerations were stringently upheld. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant department (Department of Education), and informed consent was secured from teachers and parents. Participation was voluntary, and learners were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Consistent with ethical standards for research involving minors, the study prioritised child protection, respect, and non-intrusive engagement throughout the research process. The study was delimited to Grade 1 learners within the Vhembe District to provide a focused and contextually relevant analysis of early language use across different social environments.

Therefore, the adopted methodology provided a rigorous and context-sensitive framework for investigating how young learners navigate the linguistic demands of varied social settings and how teachers mediate this process through instructional guidance and modelling.

4. Presentations of Findings and Discussions

The presentation of findings and discussion provides an in-depth analysis of how Grade 1 learners adjust their language use across different contexts. Data from classroom and playground observations revealed patterns that reflect learners' developing pragmatic competence and contextual awareness. The themes discussed illustrate the influence of social interaction, environment, and teacher mediation on learners' linguistic behavior.

4.1. Theme 1: Informal Language Use on the Playground

The first major theme that emerged from the data was Informal Language Use on the Playground. Observations revealed that playground interactions among Grade 1 learners were highly social, imaginative, and linguistically rich. Learners freely used local expressions, slang, code-switching, and laughter to negotiate play roles and strengthen peer relationships. Their speech patterns reflected spontaneity and creativity, demonstrating the social and affective dimensions of language use beyond the classroom.

During playground observations, learners were heard engaging in vibrant exchanges such as:

"You can't catch me, I'm the fastest runner here!" (Learner A, School 2).

"Hayi, you are cheating! You didn't count properly!" (Learner B, School 1).

"Let's play teacher-teacher; I will be the teacher, and you sit there!" (Learner C, School 3).

These utterances illustrate a mixture of playfulness and assertiveness, where learners used informal linguistic forms typical of peer-group talk. The incorporation of phrases like "Hayi" (a local exclamation) and playful role negotiation signify how learners use language as a social tool to build relationships, manage conflicts, and establish group hierarchies. Such patterns align with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which posits that learning and cognitive development occur through social interaction in meaningful contexts. On the playground, language functions as a mediating tool that supports socialisation and cognitive experimentation, allowing learners to explore various communicative functions without the constraints of formal rules.

Teachers interviewed also recognised the informal yet developmental value of playground talk. One teacher remarked:

"When they are outside, I can see how confident they are. They mix Tshivenda and English, and they don't worry about mistakes. But in the classroom, they become quiet and careful." (Teacher 2, School 1).

This observation underscores how the playground serves as a psychologically safe environment for linguistic risk-taking, consistent with Bodrova and Leong's (2019) findings that play promotes linguistic creativity and social negotiation. Learners' informal speech reflects authentic communication where they can test linguistic boundaries, practice turn-taking, and build a sense of identity.

However, while playground talk was beneficial for social interaction, it did not always translate seamlessly into academic discourse. Some learners carried their informal speech patterns into classroom contexts, leading to misunderstandings or teacher corrections. One teacher noted:

"Sometimes a learner will say 'Ma'am, you are cheating!' when I ask a question. They forget they are not playing." (Teacher 5, School 3).

Such instances reveal the difficulty some learners face in distinguishing between informal peer communication and

the formal expectations of classroom discourse. This finding illustrates the transitional linguistic challenge that learners encounter as they move between different sociocultural settings.

Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) helps interpret this phenomenon. Within the ZPD, learners need guided support (scaffolding) from more knowledgeable others, typically teachers, to develop the ability to use language appropriately across contexts. In this case, teachers' modelling and corrective feedback become crucial mediating strategies that help learners internalise the pragmatic norms of academic communication (Mentz and Prinsloo, 2022).

From a sociocultural perspective, the playground serves as a community of practice where learners co-construct meanings and social rules through interaction. This aligns with Mercer and Littleton's (2021) view that dialogic engagement enables learners to build shared understanding and develop cognitive flexibility. On the playground, learners were observed negotiating meaning collaboratively, as in the following dialogue:

Learner D: "You didn't count to ten!"

Learner E: "I did! You didn't listen!"

Learner F: "Let's count again together".

This short exchange demonstrates negotiation, repair, and compromise-skills foundational to communicative competence. Although the talk is informal, it fosters the linguistic and social foundations necessary for effective classroom participation.

The findings suggest that informal playground interactions are not merely recreational but also pedagogically valuable. They cultivate foundational pragmatic skills such as turn-taking, topic maintenance, and emotional expression, which later support structured communication in classroom settings. As Thomas (2020) emphasises, by age six, children begin to understand that language use must adapt to context and audience, signalling the early emergence of pragmatic competence.

Nevertheless, a clear contextual boundary was observed: while learners displayed fluency and confidence in the playground, their language became more reserved and rule-bound in the classroom. This shift highlights the dual role of the teacher as both facilitator of academic discourse and mediator of contextual language awareness. Teachers' capacity to scaffold this transition determines whether learners can effectively transfer their communicative competence from informal to formal contexts.

In summary, the findings under Theme 1 indicate that playground interactions offer a fertile ground for spontaneous language use and peer learning. However, without explicit teacher mediation, some learners struggle to adjust their language when transitioning into the classroom environment. The Sociocultural Theory underscores that such transitions require guided participation, where teachers model, scaffold, and reinforce contextually appropriate language use.

This theme, therefore, establishes a foundation for understanding the broader research problem: the contextual gap between "play talk" and "school talk." While playground communication promotes linguistic experimentation and social bonding, it also reveals the need for pedagogical strategies that help learners consciously navigate between informal and formal language registers, ensuring that their social language skills support, rather than hinder, their academic progress.

4.2. Theme 2: Formal Language Use in Classroom Settings

The second theme, Formal Language Use in Classroom Settings, revealed a marked contrast to the informal, playful talk observed on the playground. In classroom environments, learners adopted more structured, polite, and teacher-directed forms of communication. Their utterances were guided by institutional norms of politeness, turn-taking, and academic focus. Observations indicated that learners were aware of the teacher's authority and the expectations of formal speech, which required using complete sentences, appropriate greetings, and academic vocabulary.

For instance, during a literacy lesson, the following exchanges were recorded:

"Good morning, Teacher. May I please go to the toilet?" (Learner G, School 1).

"Teacher, can I read next?" (Learner H, School 2).

"The answer is three, because one plus two equals three." (Learner I, School 3).

These examples illustrate learners' efforts to conform to the formal discourse patterns of the classroom. Unlike the playground, where overlapping talk and spontaneous interruptions were common, the classroom demanded controlled turn-taking and structured participation. This linguistic shift aligns with Mercer and Littleton's (2021) argument that classroom discourse is characterised by hierarchical structures in which the teacher manages interaction and learners are socialised into using language as a cognitive tool for reasoning and learning.

Teachers interviewed also emphasised this transformation in learners' speech. One teacher noted:

"Inside the classroom, they speak more carefully. They know they must raise their hands and wait to be called. Even the words they choose are different, and they try to sound polite." (Teacher 1, School 2).

This statement highlights how learners internalise social norms through teacher modelling and reinforcement, a process central to Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory. According to Vygotsky, cognitive and linguistic development occur through internalisation, where external social interactions are gradually transformed into internal mental processes. Thus, by imitating the teacher's formal speech and receiving feedback, learners begin to internalise the pragmatic rules of classroom communication.

However, some learners found it challenging to maintain this formality, particularly when excited or unsure. In one observed instance, a learner shouted across the classroom,

"You are wrong! I said it first!", a behavior that led the teacher to gently remind the learner about classroom etiquette.

Such incidents demonstrate that while learners are developing an awareness of formal discourse, the transition from informal to formal language use remains a gradual and socially mediated process.

This finding supports Mentz and Prinsloo's (2022) view that teacher scaffolding is essential in helping young learners differentiate between communicative registers. Through structured feedback, teachers create a bridge between spontaneous peer communication and regulated academic talk. Additionally, formal classroom discourse reinforces learners' exposure to the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), often English or Afrikaans, which may differ from their home language, thus adding a multilingual dimension to their linguistic adjustment (Nkosi, 2023).

Teachers also reported that the formality of classroom speech sometimes inhibited learners' confidence, particularly those from rural or multilingual backgrounds. As one teacher explained:

"Some of them know the answer but are afraid to speak because they are thinking in Tshivenda and must translate to English. They prefer to stay quiet rather than make a mistake." (Teacher 4, School 1).

This highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and power in classroom settings. Learners' hesitance underscores the sociocultural barriers they encounter when shifting from familiar, informal linguistic forms to the formal and often foreign language of schooling. As Thomas (2020) notes, pragmatic competence is not innate but contextually learned, and learners must navigate the social and linguistic expectations of each setting.

Theme 2 emphasises that the classroom is a structured linguistic environment where learners practice academic discourse through social mediation. Teachers act as facilitators who model formal language and provide the scaffolding necessary for learners to master context-appropriate communication. This process exemplifies how sociocultural learning occurs through guided participation and interaction within institutional settings.

4.3. Theme 3: Awareness of Contextual Appropriateness

The third theme, Awareness of Contextual Appropriateness, reflects learners' emerging understanding that language must be adjusted according to the setting, audience, and purpose. Many learners demonstrated an intuitive sense that "play talk" differs from "school talk," although their ability to consistently apply this awareness varied. This finding directly supports the study's aim of exploring learners' awareness of contextual language differences.

In interviews, several learners expressed a clear recognition of this distinction:

"At school, we must talk nicely. On the playground, we can talk anyhow." (Learner J, School 2).

"Teacher says we must not shout in class, but outside we can play and shout." (Learner K, School 3).

"In class, I say 'Good morning, Ma'am,' but to my friend, I just say 'Hey!'" (Learner L, School 1).

These statements reveal an evolving metalinguistic awareness, as learners are beginning to reflect on how context shapes language choice. Their awareness corresponds with Vygotsky's (1978) idea that children acquire higher-order cognitive functions, such as self-regulation and reflective thinking, through social participation and guided learning. By observing and interacting with teachers and peers, learners internalise norms of contextual appropriateness.

Teachers also confirmed this emerging awareness. One teacher remarked:

"They know that when they enter the classroom, they must use 'school language.' Some even say to their friends, 'Don't talk like that, we are in class.'" (Teacher 6, School 3).

This teacher observation demonstrates the learners' growing self-regulatory ability, a key component of Vygotsky's sociocultural framework. Through peer correction and self-monitoring, learners begin to develop what Mercer and Littleton (2021) describe as dialogic awareness, the capacity to recognise and adapt communication according to context and audience.

However, this awareness was not universal. Some learners, particularly those from multilingual households, struggled to shift registers effectively. During an observation, one learner used informal Tshivenda expressions in response to a teacher's English instruction, leading to confusion and laughter from peers. The teacher later explained:

"He understands what I mean, but sometimes he answers in the way he speaks at home. It's not disrespect; it's just what he is used to." (Teacher 3, School 2).

This situation highlights how linguistic background and exposure influence contextual language awareness. Learners' capacity to differentiate between formal and informal registers depends not only on individual maturity but also on the linguistic diversity of their social environments. As Bodrova and Leong (2019) argue, play and interaction provide essential opportunities for children to practice such shifts, while the teacher's role is to make these implicit differences explicit through scaffolding.

The findings under Theme 3 thus affirm that awareness of contextual appropriateness develops gradually through social interaction and teacher mediation. The interplay between informal playground talks and formal classroom discourse provides fertile ground for learners to experiment with linguistic flexibility. In the framework of Sociocultural Theory, this process exemplifies the co-construction of knowledge, where learners actively construct understanding through guided participation within their social worlds.

4.4. Theme 4: Teacher Support and Mediation

The fourth theme, Teacher Support and Mediation, highlights the crucial role teachers play in guiding learners' understanding of appropriate language use across different contexts. Findings from interviews and classroom observations revealed that teachers acted as mediators, scaffolding learners' transitions between the informal, spontaneous speech of the playground and the structured, formal discourse of the classroom. This theme resonates strongly with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises that learning occurs through guided social interaction, where teachers and more competent peers provide support within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Teachers consistently described their role as one of modelling, correcting, and reinforcing appropriate language behavior. For instance, one teacher explained:

"I always remind them that the way we speak outside is different from how we speak in class. When a learner says something in slang, I repeat it correctly and ask them to say it again." (Teacher 2, School 1).

This teacher's practice reflects scaffolding, a process where the adult structures learning to bridge the gap between what the child can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance. By reformulating learners' speech, the teacher not only corrects errors but also provides linguistic models for appropriate communication. Such strategies enable learners to internalise the differences between informal and formal registers, fostering what Mercer and Littleton (2021) call dialogic teaching, where the teacher uses dialogue as a tool for cognitive and linguistic development.

Classroom observations further illustrated how teachers embedded language mediation within daily routines. During lessons, teachers encouraged learners to use polite expressions such as "Excuse me, Ma'am", "May I please answer?", and "Thank you". When a learner responded in an informal tone, the teacher would gently correct them by modelling the appropriate form. One observed exchange demonstrates this practice:

Learner M: "Teacher, I finished!"

Teacher: "That's good, now say, 'I have finished my work, Ma'am."

Learner M: "I have finished my work, Ma'am."

Teacher: "Excellent, that's how we speak in class."

This type of guided repetition reflects the sociocultural process of appropriation, where learners internalise new linguistic forms through active participation in social exchanges. Over time, these external corrections become internalised speech norms, enabling learners to self-regulate their language use (Vygotsky, 1978).

Teachers also reported using explicit discussions to raise learners' awareness of context. One teacher shared:

"Sometimes, I tell them stories about when I was at school and how I learned to talk differently to my teacher and my friends. They laugh, but it helps them understand." (Teacher 5, School 3).

This anecdotal strategy exemplifies contextual mediation, where the teacher connects learning to real-life experiences. It supports the notion that meaning-making in language learning is inherently social and contextual, reinforcing Bodrova and Leong's (2019) view that narratives and shared experiences are powerful tools for cognitive development in early childhood.

Despite these efforts, teachers acknowledged challenges in maintaining learners' consistency in contextual language use, especially among those from multilingual or rural backgrounds. One teacher noted:

"Sometimes they mix English and Tshivenda, even in formal situations. I understand because they speak Tshivenda at home, but I remind them to try using English in class, so they get used to it." (Teacher 3, School 3)

This statement reveals that teachers not only scaffold linguistic form but also mediate between cultural and linguistic systems. In multilingual environments like the Vhembe District, this dual mediation is essential for supporting learners' academic development while respecting their linguistic identities. Nkosi (2023) observes that multilingual learners often navigate overlapping linguistic norms, and teachers play a central role in helping them code-switch appropriately without undermining their home language competence.

Therefore, the data indicated that teacher mediation extended beyond correction to include emotional and motivational support. Learners felt more confident participating when teachers created a nurturing, non-judgmental atmosphere. One learner expressed:

"When teacher helps me say it right, I am happy. She says, 'Well done!' and I try again." (Learner N, School 1).

This reflects Vygotsky's idea that social interaction and positive reinforcement contribute to affective engagement, a crucial factor in learning. By building trust and reducing fear of mistakes, teachers enable learners to experiment with language and internalise formal registers more effectively. Mentz and Prinsloo (2022) similarly argue that emotional scaffolding complements linguistic support, as confidence enhances learners' willingness to engage in classroom discourse.

Observations further revealed that teachers employed interactive strategies such as role-play, pair discussions, and group storytelling to help learners practice switching between informal and formal language use. For example, during a literacy activity, learners acted out a scenario where they greeted the teacher formally and later spoke informally to their friends. The teacher later reflected:

"When they act it out, they understand better. They can see that language changes with who you are talking to." (Teacher 4, School 3).

Such interactive, experiential methods align with Vygotsky's (1978) principle that learning occurs through social participation. By engaging learners in role-based dialogue, teachers situate language use in authentic contexts, allowing learners to grasp its pragmatic dimensions.

The findings from Theme 4 demonstrate that teacher support and mediation are pivotal in shaping learners' contextual language awareness. Through consistent modelling, corrective feedback, and emotional encouragement, teachers serve as linguistic and cultural guides who help learners transition smoothly between the informal discourse of peer interaction and the formal discourse of academic learning. This process reflects a collaborative construction of knowledge, where both teacher and learner contribute to meaning-making within social contexts.

Theme 4 reinforces the centrality of teacher mediation within the Sociocultural Theory framework. Teachers act not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators of social and linguistic competence. Their scaffolding practices ensure that learners not only acquire linguistic forms but also understand when, why, and how to use them appropriately, an essential foundation for communicative competence and academic success in the early years of schooling.

The findings confirm that learners exhibit distinct language styles depending on the setting, demonstrating awareness of social and communicative norms. Teacher mediation emerged as a critical factor in guiding learners' transition between informal and formal registers. The discussion highlights that fostering contextual language awareness strengthens learners' communication, participation, and academic success in early education.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that language use among Grade 1 learners is deeply influenced by the social context in which communication occurs. Learners demonstrated distinct variations between the informal, expressive, and creative language used on the playground and the more structured, polite, and rule-governed language expected in the classroom. This shift in language behavior reflects early signs of pragmatic awareness and the growing ability to adjust speech according to audience and purpose. However, the findings also revealed that not all learners transition smoothly between these linguistic contexts, with some carrying playground discourse patterns into formal learning spaces. This indicates a need for intentional instructional support to help young learners understand and manage these contextual differences.

Teachers emerged as key mediators in this process, using modelling, correction, and contextual explanations to help learners navigate between informal and formal registers. Their role highlights the sociocultural foundation of language learning, where interaction and guided participation facilitate cognitive and linguistic development. The study further highlights awareness of contextual language use contributes not only to academic success but also to social competence, as learners learn to communicate effectively within different environments.

Therefore, the study emphasises the importance of integrating contextual language awareness into the Foundation Phase curriculum. Doing so can equip learners with essential communicative skills that extend beyond the classroom, enabling them to participate meaningfully in both academic and social settings. Promoting this awareness through teacher guidance, classroom practice, and home support can strengthen learners' linguistic flexibility and confidence, laying a strong foundation for future learning and interaction.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest several key recommendations aimed at strengthening learners' ability to use language appropriately across different contexts. A central recommendation is the integration of contextual language awareness into the early literacy curriculum. Learners should be provided with structured opportunities to explore how language varies according to audience, purpose, and setting. Through activities such as role-play, storytelling, and dramatisation, children can actively practice shifting between informal and formal registers. Embedding these activities in daily classroom routines will help learners become more conscious of how language functions as a social tool and enhance their communicative competence both inside and outside the classroom.

Another important recommendation focuses on the professional development of teachers. Since teachers play a mediating role in guiding learners' linguistic development, they should be equipped with effective strategies to model appropriate language use and facilitate smooth transitions between playground and classroom communication. Continuous training workshops and collaborative learning communities can help teachers reflect on their own language practices, share effective strategies, and learn how to scaffold learners' understanding of language variation. Strengthening teachers' capacity in this area ensures that they can support learners not only in mastering linguistic structures but also in using language pragmatically and appropriately within different social contexts.

The study also highlights the importance of fostering collaboration between schools and families. Children's language use is shaped by both home and school environments, making parental involvement essential in promoting consistent language development. Schools should engage parents through workshops and communication platforms that emphasise the value of reinforcing appropriate language use at home. Activities such as storytelling, shared reading, and guided conversations can help parents provide the necessary support for learners to internalise contextual language norms. When parents and teachers work together, learners benefit from a cohesive linguistic environment that bridges informal and formal language practices.

In multilingual contexts such as the Vhembe District, it is vital to encourage multilingual sensitivity and inclusion. Recognising and valuing learners' home languages while guiding them in the effective use of the language of learning and teaching can enhance their confidence and participation. Teachers can adopt translanguaging practices that allow learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning and express themselves appropriately across settings. This inclusive approach not only strengthens learners' linguistic flexibility but also affirms their cultural identity. Overall, these recommendations underscore the need for a holistic, context-sensitive approach that integrates curriculum innovation, teacher empowerment, parental engagement, and linguistic inclusivity to foster effective language use from the playground to the classroom.

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