
Research article

Navigating the complexities of learning history in English in two South African schools

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Abstract

Despite extensive research into the intersection between English aptitude and academic achievement, the challenges that learners for whom English is not their first language face when taught history in English are still underexplored. Underpinned by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this study investigates the linguistic challenges that South African learners face when taught history using the English language, and then explores how learners would want to be taught. Using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, this phenomenological study adopting a qualitative approach generated data from 12 purposively sampled participants drawn from two rural schools. Themed findings explicate that learners had poor command of the English language used for teaching and learning, and hence misunderstood command words, lacked confidence, mispronounced words and did not read for comprehension. The learners proposed that history teachers must employ scaffolding and translanguaging approaches to enhance mastery of history concepts. These findings suggest the need for schools through the

Department of Education in South Africa, and in any other countries in similar contexts, to embrace scaffolding and translanguaging as pedagogical approaches in teaching history for understanding, rather than for uniformity. These insights could inform policies and practice for the language of teaching for the history curriculum in countries that are multilingual societies.

Keywords African-language speakers; complexities; English; history; South African school

Introduction

Despite extensive research into the intersection between English-language ability and academic achievement, the challenges that African-language speakers face when taught history in English is still underexplored. English is a primary language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in South Africa from Grade 4 to Grade 12 (DBE, 2011). Scholars have shown that one's level of English ability has an impact on the effective learning and teaching of other subjects (Hassan and Brzo, 2022; Oattes et al., 2018), which applies to learning history, since it is regarded as a subject that is linguistically demanding. Previous research has proven that Indigenous languages, which are the first languages of most learners in South Africa, play a key role in allowing students to learn with understanding (Maluleke, 2019; Manyike and Shava, 2018), and that the continual use of English as the LOLT in schools leads to a high failure rate (Chimbunde and Kgari-Masondo, 2022). As argued by Devi (2023), there is a strong relationship between students' language ability and academic achievement, which shows that those who are more proficient in English can achieve better academic levels. Consequently, there has been a debate in South Africa that appraises translanguaging pedagogy as an approach to decolonising English-language teaching (Mutongoza et al., 2023; Rajendram, 2022; Wei and Garcia, 2022). However, these debates have concentrated on equality and social justice issues, overlooking the importance of translanguaging in helping students to learn any subject matter with understanding. Although most South African learners are not native English speakers, they are taught history in that language, neglecting the first language with which they are conversant. Interestingly, several studies conducted seem to be generic, with very few studies focusing on the challenges faced by African-language-speaking learners when they are taught history in English. As such, there has been little discussion about the challenges faced by African-language speakers and their choice of the LOLT in the learning of history in South Africa. It is this scholarly gap that this study addresses. By exploring the challenges that students face when learning history in English, and how they prefer to learn and be taught, the study contributes to scholarship on teaching history for understanding, as is required in the twenty-first century. The findings could inform policies and practice on the language of teaching for the history curriculum, in countries that are multilingual societies. The study is informed by the following questions.

1. What linguistic challenges do African-language-speaking learners face when taught history in English in the Intermediate Phase?
2. How do learners want these language issues to be addressed?

Literature review

Language and education

Similarly to other academic subjects, the teaching of history requires learners to make sense of the historical content, concepts and skills from sources usually written in English. English is a language that exists across all subjects, and requires the ability to listen, speak, read and write. In most contexts, English ability, in general, was reported to be a significant factor affecting students' academic success (Devi, 2023; Millie, 2023; Soruç et al., 2022). Although the use of English as a medium of instruction has been growing as a global phenomenon in education (Macaro, 2020; Mutongoza et al., 2023; Tai and Wong, 2023), researchers have reported tension between policy and practice in its use, concerning the

issue of language choice by teachers and students (Tai, 2023). This is because English is often used to teach academic subjects in contexts in which the first language of the majority of the population is not English. As such, a monolingual ideology tends to be adopted, which restricts use of the first language. Around the world, this tension has inspired research on multilingual education and second-language education, exploring how translanguaging can be used as an inclusive pedagogical practice to bring equal access to educational opportunities, and to help student participation in classroom settings (Tai and Wong, 2023).

In South Africa, one of the central themes in the quest to decolonise education has been the debates about the prioritisation of English as the medium of instruction in schools at the expense of Indigenous languages (Chimbunde and Kgari-Masondo, 2022; Mutongoza et al., 2023). Most learners in South Africa who have English as the LOLT are not native English speakers, and they come to learn through it while they are still learning the language (Mweli, 2018). Yet Mutongoza et al. (2023) report that there has been a wealth of evidence that shows the cognitive benefits of first-language instruction and language policies that promote additive bilingual approaches. In agreement, the late Professor Neville Alexander argued that education can only happen effectively in a language that one understands best, that is, one's first language (Alexander, 1996; Kaschula and Wolff, 2016). However, the use of the first language in the education space contradicts what is happening in the South African context, where a monolingual ideology is followed. As explained by Mpofo (2023), in 2013, South Africa's Department of Basic Education set out a policy to enhance academic success by introducing a strategy termed 'English Across the Curriculum', which integrated language skills in content subjects such as history. By extension, this was like imposing English on African-language-speaking learners, and it confirms the argument raised by Meighan (2023), following Phillipson (1992), that there is a long history of English being imposed on non-dominant cultures and what are colloquially termed vernacular languages under the tenets of civilisation and linguistic imperialism. Rajendram (2022) also argues that English as a medium of instruction, against the backdrop of colonialism, continues to play a role in stigmatising the language practices of minoritised and racialised learners, and in undermining the rich linguistic repertoires of learners, suggesting that LOLT policy may restrict opportunities for teachers and students with shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate effectively (Tai, 2023).

Language policy and Anglonormativity in South African schools

South Africa is a multilingual country, and societal multilingualism is considered the norm (Makalela, 2015; Probyn, 2019). As such, South Africa is one of the countries that has become a centre of discussion in language in education policy issues, because of its unique multicultural and historical experience of apartheid. Taking guidance from the 1996 South African Constitution, the country adopted the Language in Education Policy to promote language equity and quality education (DoE, 1997). The policy sought to promote multilingualism in education, to redress the linguistic imbalances of the past, and to promote national reconciliation after the political system that was based on racial and linguistic segregation and oppression (Probyn, 2019). While the policy document recognises that the cultural diversity of South Africa is a national asset, its implementation was fraught with many difficulties. As Probyn (2019: 216) confirms:

Most learners in South African schools are African language speakers, yet the dominance of English in the political economy has meant that schools choose to switch to English medium instruction by Grade 4, before learners have the necessary English proficiency to access the curriculum, with negative effects on learning.

The challenges are better explained by Guzula (2019), who claims that the switch from monolingual African-language instruction to monolingual English has led to learners being constructed with a deficit, as passive/lacking agency, as failures, as having low levels of comprehension, as unable to decode, as needing remedial assistance, as non-readers and as non-producers of meaning. This confirms what McKinney (2022) calls 'Anglonormativity', or the expectation that children should be proficient in a standardised version of English when they reach Grade 4. According to McKinney (2017), Anglonormativity ensures that from Grade 4 onwards, the language of instruction in schools is limited to English, regardless of learners' and teachers' proficiency in the language. Despite the linguistic challenges, both teachers and learners are expected to teach and learn school history in English.

As such, the kind of language needed for history, such as historical terms, proper nouns, titles, foreign words, speculative statements, the passive voice, language of inference and uncertainty drive the need for the history teacher to create hypothetical questions as a common aspect of the discourse, which presents a challenge for African-language speakers (Vela-Rodrigo, 2022). As pointed out by Wahlberg (2006), history is a very demanding subject in terms of concepts, vocabulary, perspectives, varying interpretations and fitting facts into chronological order, to name just a few aspects. As such, history needs a great deal of theoretical understanding, which is gained through debating issues in one's head. Schleppegrell and Oliveira (2006) argue that students need to be able not only to understand sequences of events and the roles that historical participants played in those events, but also to recognise the interpretation that is an integral part of all historical reporting, and that is built into every text. Among the language skills expected to be mastered in the learning of history are listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and presenting, and language structures and conventions (Mpofu, 2023). In support, Wolf et al. (2023) explicate that explanations and arguments in history require such linguistic features as nominalisation, embedded clauses and technical lexis. This suggests that learners are expected to read, listen, interpret, analyse, synthesise, compare, contrast and evaluate information from historical sources written in English (Duhaylongsod et al., 2015), which may be challenging, given that it is a foreign language to learners. The difficulties may be even worse for some learners from small towns and rural areas, because they do not learn English outside school. To address such language barriers, several studies suggest the employment of translanguaging approaches in the teaching of content subjects in English (Mutongoza et al., 2023; Tai, 2023; Wei and Garcia, 2022).

Translanguaging as a pedagogy

This study sees translanguaging as a pedagogical approach that is tailored to ensure that learners understand the subject matter of the history curriculum that could be taught using both English and other, Indigenous, languages drawn from their social context. According to Makalela (2015), translanguaging asserts that languages are neither hermetically sealed, discrete entities with distinct borders nor objects that can be put into boxes. It is predicated on the understanding of a complete account of speakers' discursive resources. In this study, the term translanguaging refers to pedagogical practice in bilingual classrooms where teachers and students deliberately alter languages of input and output (Tai, 2023). As further explained by Li (2018), translanguaging views language as a multilingual, multimodal, multisensory and multisemiotic entity that enables intelligibility beyond the named languages and language varieties. Translanguaging is an approach that can be useful in societies where the language of the once colonised is neglected. As Makalela (2023: 1) argues, translanguaging is a viable strategy to transform learning and teaching practices that 'have historically followed the one-oneness ideology of the European Enlightenment, during which the ideology of one nation one language influenced socio-political thinking'. Several terminologies have been advanced to define language alternation, including 'code-switching' and 'code-meshing', which commonly explain the use of the first language because of a deficiency in the second language (Tai, 2023). Translanguaging is a pedagogical practice where one receives input in one language and gives output through the medium of another language, to maximise learning and to promote full understanding of the subject matter. Considering this, the purpose of this study is not to discourage the learning of English, because it is internationally recognised, and therefore knowledge of English can be of benefit in a global village. Rather, the study advocates for the mobilisation of multiple languages and other meaning-making resources in a dynamic and integrated way to promote understanding of concepts by students during history teaching. This is premised on the fact that South Africa has 12 official languages, namely, Sign Language, Afrikaans, Northern Sotho, Sotho, English, Ndebele, Swazi, Zulu, Venda, Xhosa, Tsonga and Tswana (Makalela, 2022; Mutongoza et al., 2023).

History education in South Africa

In South Africa, history teaching before 1994 was mostly located in the traditional fact-learning tradition (Bertram, 2020), which emphasised rote learning of propositional knowledge. Although English was used as a medium of instruction at that time, it was relatively undemanding in terms of English competence. Bertram (2008) claims that the British system served as the inspiration for the history curricula implemented in South African schools following 1994. The emphasis was on studying historical

events, comprehending them and providing an explanation for them, which called for reading and comprehension skills in English. The apartheid syllabus was superseded in 1995 by the Interim Core Syllabus, Standards 8–10 (Bertram, 2008). This curriculum stressed that studying history was an inquiry approach that needed the development and use of certain skills. With the replacement of the Interim Core Syllabus in 2003 by the National Curriculum Statement for History (Grades 10–12), a greater focus was placed on historical inquiry skills (DoE, 2003). In 2011, the latest reform attempt saw the adoption of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement in South Africa, solidifying the inquiry-based approach of doing history, a complete change in the approach to learning history, where students were to learn history the way historians do. This then exposed the limitations of using English as a medium of instruction for African-language speakers. The model expected students to comprehend that various people, in different eras, have varied interpretations and understandings of key historical events, demonstrating the connection between procedural and substantive knowledge (Wassermann et al., 2023). This called for learners' increased ability to converse in English. As such, the current South African school history curriculum is heavily influenced by the English disciplinary approach to teaching history, which requires analysis and interpretation of the historical text, and not simply rote learning of facts, as in apartheid-era classrooms. The linguistic challenges posed by this shift towards an inquiry-based model revolve around the development of cognitive, historical thinking skills and require learners to grapple with historical concepts, even at elementary school, which is the subject of analysis in this study.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by the sociocultural theory advanced by Vygotsky (1962), which posits that learning takes place when students engage in social interactions. At the core of the theory are the assumptions that: knowledge is always constructed, the construction process is formed when one interacts, people interact daily in their activities, and meaning is negotiated through the interaction. Vygotsky's (1962) theory speaks of the zone of proximal development, which is a level of development slightly above a person's current level of development. When children have learning difficulties, Vygotsky suggests that teachers can use scaffolding as support, or help through someone who is more proficient in mastering the material helping to solve problems (Darmayanti et al., 2023). The theory also argues that cognitive development is conducted via social interactions, wherein the learning process will continue more effectively because of interactions that students engage in with peers who are more knowledgeable, or adults such as teachers and family members. The zone of proximal development is based on the difference between the things that an individual can do independently and without any help, and those that can be done with the help or encouragement of a peer or an adult. The individual learns more effectively because of an interaction with more knowledgeable peers or adults. Moreover, it is based on the view that the individual can do things with the help of others. According to Vygotsky (1962, 1987), language is improved with social interactions conducted for communication purposes, and it has two roles that are critical for cognitive development. The first role of language is that it is the means of transmission of knowledge from adults to children, and the second is that language is single-handedly an immensely powerful means of supporting children's intellectual harmony (Erbil, 2020). This suggests that learning is a collaborative effort where knowledge is constructed by interacting with one another, with culture and with society. The tenets of this theory resonate well with the pitch of this study, because teaching and learning history through the English language is a socially constructed phenomenon. The study siphons insights from Vygotsky's sociocultural framework to find a pedagogical approach that honours human diversity and emphasises the influence that social and historical contexts have on teaching and learning. The theory assists our understanding that teaching and learning of history in English takes places within a culture, context and society.

Methodology

Underpinned by Vygotsky's (1962) sociocultural theory, this study set out to investigate the linguistic challenges that learners faced when taught history using the English language, and then explored how learners would like to be taught. To address these concerns, a phenomenological study adopting a qualitative approach was conducted, in which the emphasis was to generate an in-depth understanding of social reality from the perspectives of research participants (Taylor et al., 2016). The choice of

the qualitative approach was deliberate because we were interested in generating data at the site (Creswell and Creswell, 2022) where African-language-speaking learners were facing challenges during the learning of history. To back up the qualitative approach, the study adopted the phenomenology research design premised on the researchers being concerned with describing the lived experiences of learners and teachers about the phenomenon under exploration. The study employed semi-structured interviews and classroom observations as data-generating tools. Information was thus gathered in the natural setting by talking directly to learners and teachers, and seeing them behave and act within their context (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). We viewed semi-structured interviews as quite useful in the current study, because they permitted embodied presence, which enabled interpersonal contact, which was context sensitive, and conversational flexibility to the fullest extent, in that the data generated came to reflect 'a reality constructed by the interviewees and interviewer' (Taylor et al., 2016: 101). To generate such data, purposive sampling was used to select 12 participants, consisting of 10 Grade 6 learners and 2 Grade 6 teachers from two primary schools in Rouxville, South Africa. The participants were interviewed on two separate days for 20 minutes each using semi-structured interviews. We employed both English and Sesotho languages to conduct the interviews to enable us to generate both rich and accurate data. Participants were also observed on two different days for 40 minutes during history lessons. Data generated from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were analysed using the stages of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This kind of thematic analysis focuses on finding emerging themes or patterns of meanings across a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, we immersed ourselves in the data by reading transcripts several times, generating codes and reviewing them, coding the data, and developing themes and subthemes, as well as reviewing the themes and subthemes. To avoid subjectivity and personal bias, the analysed data were shared with the two teachers who took part in the study to confirm or disconfirm coded data and the interpretations that we made. Prolonged engagement with the learners and triangulation of data-generating tools enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings. Long-term interactions allowed us to establish rapport with the participants; then, we listened and watched how the students interacted with their teachers and peers, which revealed information about the participants' English-language communication skills. Based on this, we used both Sesotho and English to conduct the interviews to maximise question comprehension. Before starting data generation, we sought permission from the Department of Basic Education in the Free State to conduct the study. Thereafter, we obtained clearance from the University of the Free State, Faculty of Education Ethics Committee protocol reference number UFS-HDS2022/1893/23. Subsequently, permission was requested from the principals of the two schools where the study was conducted. The teachers signed consent forms, while parents signed on behalf of the learners. To maintain privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, the names of the research participants and those of the selected schools were hidden in this research report. Hence, pseudonyms were used to conceal the identities of the participants (using the letter 'L' for learner and 'T' for teacher).

Findings and discussion

The data generated from the semi-structured interviews and participant observation were synthesised and themed, and are reported below.

Challenges experienced by learners when taught history in English

Misunderstanding of command words and instructions

Despite the fact that Grade 6 learners were exposed to English language from Grade 4, it emerged from semi-structured interviews and observations that learners misunderstood instructions given by teachers, thereby making them unable to complete activities, as required by the assessment tasks. In the words of L3, 'We do not understand the command words in the questions when we do class and homework ...'. The sentiments expressed by the learner show that incomplete learning would take place if a student were unable to answer given questions. In support, L1 remarked, 'My language is Sesotho, so sometimes when I read a question, I do not know what it is saying.' The findings show that the learner is conversant with the language that is used at home. To clarify the extent of the misinterpretations of the questions, L2 exemplified, 'the question would say "compare and contrast" and I do not know these words'. When faced with such a challenge, some learners revealed that they overlooked the words, and then worked

on what they had clarity about. L5 revealed: 'When I do not understand a word, I skip it and I read words that I understand.' This finding shows that learners whose English ability is weak tend to misunderstand activities and assessment instructions, which often compromises their performances in the assigned tasks. To confirm the challenges for learners, T2 said:

They do not answer the questions that you ask them, especially if you teach them in English the whole period, and thereafter give them the activity, ... you will see that this learner did not understand anything said in English.

That was backed up by T1, who elaborated:

I have taught them in English during your presence ... fine. Then see tomorrow what they would have answered. Many of these learners do not understand simple question words like explain, identify, name, state.

The two teachers revealed that learners had difficulties in answering simple questions that were appropriate for their level. While T1 attributed this to a poor understanding of command words, T2 ascribed it to a poor command of the English language. To support T1's suggestion, what emerged during classroom observation was that learners answered a question that required them to state whether a statement was true or false by explaining. Similarly, in T2's class, learners did not answer questions based on an extract read to all, and one learner dominated the discussion while the rest remained silent. Taken together, this study implies that the failure to answer the question was not necessarily because the learners were not intelligent; rather, it was a language issue. Research has shown that language proficiency and the pursuit of knowledge are closely intertwined. Ultimately, languages are tools to navigate better understanding. As [Welply \(2022\)](#) argues, in school systems in which a single, standard form of language is proven as legitimate, students who do not speak the English language tend to be viewed as less competent, and multilingualism is seen as a problem or a barrier to successful learning. In agreement, both [Devi \(2023\)](#) and [Millie \(2023\)](#) admit that English-language ability has been identified as a key predictor of academic achievement in various educational contexts. At face value, the classroom observations and the interview responses imply that the learners had challenges with comprehending command words found in instructions, and with understanding the instruction given in English. This is consistent with [Rule \(2017\)](#), who reported that 78 per cent of elementary learners do not understand what they are reading in instructions. In support, [Lodge et al. \(2018\)](#) confirm that learners tend to find instructions confusing when there is no effective intervention by teachers. Such a lack of teacher intervention contrasts with the sociocultural theory, which encourages interaction between teachers and learners ([Shibina and Vidyapeetham, 2022](#)). This study agrees with [Jones et al. \(2022\)](#), who report that students who speak a language or languages other than English at home, and who are learning English as an added language, are faced with the challenging task of simultaneously mastering both academic content and English-language ability. Similarly, [Wolf et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that increased language demands impose greater challenges on African-language-speaking learners, who must cope with learning rigorous history content while simultaneously developing English-language skills.

Reading for comprehension

From the semi-structured interviews, both teachers and learners concurred that learners could read historical texts without understanding. This was reported by T1, who said:

Reading for understanding is a skill that is also a challenge with our learners because some learners can read but do not understand what they read. Let us say they read a history-based text and then are asked to summarise the contents in their own words ... they fail even to narrate in their first language.

In support, L5 remarked:

When I am home reading and I struggle with some words ... I will wait to go to school, so that the teacher can tell me the meanings of the unfamiliar words.

L2 confessed, 'Yes, I know how to read English, but I struggle with some meanings of words.' In agreement, L9 disclosed that 'the teacher can read them again and explain, but sometimes we forget

because we do not always read with understanding'. This finding suggests that some textbooks consist of words with which learners are not familiar, which makes it difficult for them to read with understanding. Classroom observations also revealed that some of the learners could read fluently, although they misconstrued the content that they were reading. Given the diversity of ability inherent in schools, this study argues that some learners find it difficult to read with understanding because they have different learning styles, which require a variety of resources to enhance understanding. Undeniably, from the interviews, it was clear that some learners are sometimes able to read a historical text, but without understanding. This confirms an earlier study by [Husbands \(1996\)](#), cited in [Wahlberg \(2006\)](#), which argues that historical understanding is not possible without a command of historical vocabulary. Interestingly, L5 revealed an important aspect of enlisting the services of the teacher for help in understanding the read text, which the sociocultural theory appraises. As explicitly stated by [Wolf et al. \(2023\)](#), sociocultural theory emphasises that students learn from engagements, as well as from the support they may receive from more expert language users, such as teachers ([Darmayanti et al., 2023](#); [Vygotsky, 1987](#)). From a sociocultural perspective, a learner will perform better when given help by others to complete a task than when working alone. This potential performance is described by Vygotsky's idea of scaffolding in the zone of proximal development ([Wolf et al., 2023](#)).

Mispronunciation and use of grandiloquence by teachers

From the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, it emerged that comprehension of history lessons was impeded by mispronunciation and the use of grandiloquence by teachers. As L4 remarked, 'some problems emanate from our teacher as well ... the teacher poorly pronounces some words, like archaeologist, which makes us not understand what the teacher is saying'. L2 backed that up, and complained that 'The teacher must pronounce words properly the way we know them in English, and not like another language from another world.' In support, L2 narrated:

The teacher would come say 'uh-paa-tide'. So, I will be confused. When the teacher leaves, I would ask my friend, what is 'uh-paa-tide', and she would say, 'ah-pahr-teid'. I will then understand what the teacher was talking about.

Earlier research confirms this finding ([Du Plessis, 2020](#); [Kaufmann, 2017](#)), and supports that learners find it challenging to follow lessons presented using unfamiliar pronunciation of words. For instance, in this study, the teacher used the British pronunciation of the word 'apartheid' during a lesson presentation, which the learner did not understand until a friend clarified it. Additionally, during observation, a teacher could sometimes mispronounce some words without the learners' knowledge of the mispronunciation, which affected learners' comprehension of words, and led to learners losing the meaning of what the presentation intended to convey. Drawing from the sociocultural theory, this study indicates that language and learning are inseparable. As such, when the language that is used by the teacher to communicate to learners is poor, knowledge construction will be impeded.

The use of language beyond the learners' cognitive level was a common observation noted during the study. From the semi-structured interviews, it was also construed that teachers use 'big' words that were not within learners' vocabulary. This was reported by L6, who said, 'If ma'am can speak simple English, I would understand what she is saying, and not these big words that make me struggle.' To further complicate the matter, rather than explaining grey areas to help learners understand the concepts, teachers tended to concentrate on curriculum coverage. This was pointed out by L10, who proposed:

I would like the teacher to talk to us a little bit slow, so that we can understand her, instead of rushing to complete the chapters in the history textbook.

The expression by the learner suggests that prolonged engagement between the learner and the teacher is important if learners are to learn history concepts with exceptional ease. This finding acknowledges the values of the sociocultural theory, which claims that an effective learner-teacher interaction is needed to help and develop learners' knowledge construction ([Shibina and Vidyapeetham, 2022](#)). The challenge of grandiloquence is consistent with [Cahn and Renandya \(2017\)](#), who argue that some teachers' elevated level of English ability leads them to use grandiloquence, which makes it difficult for learners to understand them. Yet, [Khatri and Regmi \(2022\)](#) report that one must know the jargon used in history to effectively teach and learn it with comprehension. Considering this argument, learners therefore need to be conversant with terminologies used in history for them to be able to understand historical concepts and vocabulary when presented in English.

Lack of confidence

This study found that learners lacked confidence in responding to history questions asked in English. L10 said: 'I am afraid of speaking in English, but when I speak and struggle, I answer in Sesotho.' L8 further revealed: 'Sometimes I want to answer, but I do not know the English words, and I therefore do not answer.' In support, L4 said: 'There are words that I cannot speak ...'. L3 went further: 'I am afraid to give a wrong answer, so when the teacher asks me a question, I speak low.' L5 elaborated: 'some learners laugh at me ... and sometimes the teacher makes a joke out of me'. The sentiments expressed show a lack of confidence in the use of the LOTL by learners. This confirms [Sarmiento-Campos et al. \(2022\)](#), who argue that learners have several speaking difficulties, one of which is a fear of making errors when speaking in English. Teachers interviewed also corroborated the sentiments of the learners. T1 shared that 'it is a bit challenging for them to speak in English because some of them struggle a lot with pronunciation of new words.' In agreement, T2 remarked:

many of them will speak broken English here and there, ... thereafter request to use a little bit of Sesotho, since they are not confident in expressing themselves in English ... they tend to muddle words when they talk, but I would understand what they are saying.

These sentiments were also seen in the speech of learners during classroom observations. To conceal their limitations, learners reverted to the language they used at home, which was Sesotho. This is an intriguing observation, because falling back on their first language was a sign that they knew the content of the history subject, but that the medium of communication was betraying them, since it was now a barrier for them to communicate what they knew. As a result, they reverted to Sesotho to show their mastery of the subject. This finding is backed up by an earlier study by [Cankaya \(2017\)](#), which claims that learners have challenges expressing their ideas correctly in English, hindering construction of knowledge through language, as encouraged by the sociocultural theory ([Darmayanti et al., 2023](#); [Erbil, 2020](#); [Welply, 2022](#)). This study argues, therefore, that the teaching of history must not be confined to using English, but that other languages used in the community in which the school is located should also be used. If the school is in a community that speaks Sesotho, then that language must complement English in the delivery of history lessons.

Strategies to address learners' linguistic challenges

Scaffolding and teaching history in English

From the semi-structured interviews, it emerged that learners can understand history concepts taught in English if they get aid from teachers. The learners suggested some interesting scaffolding activities that they thought were able to support them in understanding the history content taught in English. L9 suggested that 'The teacher can help us understand the history concepts by explaining and giving us examples that are drawn from our experiences.' In addition, L8 proposed that 'The teachers can explain history extracts to us step by step to help understand the subject matter under discussion.' In addition, L3 said, 'The teachers can write those big words we don't understand in simpler terms in brackets.' L8 supports L3 by saying:

The teacher can write the vocabulary that we do not understand outside the brackets, and then tell us in brackets what that word means, so that we can get its meaning and use it in context.

From these sentiments, it is clear that the learners believed that they could understand the history content if they got expert help from the teachers. This corroborates the sociocultural theory, in which Vygotsky suggests that teachers can use scaffolding as support, or assist through someone more proficient in mastering the material to help solve problems ([Darmayanti et al., 2023](#); [Vygotsky, 1962, 1987](#)). In this way, language is improved with social interactions conducted for communication purposes. This finding resonates with several studies that report that the process of helping learners usually happens during an interactive activity when a novice and an expert work together to achieve the desired result ([Jones et al., 2022](#); [Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022](#)). By doing that, the expert passes on their ability to the novice. This study contends that it is very possible that teachers who use scaffolding in the teaching of history in English would be able to grow their students' learning more effectively. As argued by [Heo \(2022\)](#), scaffolding offers students intensive and temporary assistance until they become

autonomous and independent in learning, given that it is a process that allows students to perform a task or accomplish a goal through adapted assistance from more proficient history teachers. The essence of scaffolding is to support both language and content learning. However, success depends on how scaffolding unfolds in an elementary language immersion classroom, because it hinges on how a teacher considers a variety of complex elements, such as instructional stages and students' varying degrees of prior knowledge and experiences, and how these interplay with scaffolding.

Translanguaging approaches

A unique finding of this study is that learners and teachers concurred in suggesting the use of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach to help learners for whom English is not their first language understand history content taught in English. First, it was L4 who suggested that 'After a historical text in English is read, it may be explained to us in Sesotho to make other learners who do not know English understand.' This was supported by L1, who said: 'When I struggle with some words, the teacher can read them again, and then explain them in Sesotho.'

This finding is intriguing, because rather than history teachers suggesting an educational strategy that can be employed to help learners understand the subject matter of the discipline, it is the learners proposing a solution. There was therefore an exchange of roles between the teachers and the learners. The finding shows that learners are aware of the advantages that could be tapped from their historically undermined language to accompany the LOTL for them to benefit from the education system. In the same line of thinking, T2 said:

Often, most students speak broken English, and midway through their presentation will request to continue presenting using Sesotho, which I allow because my focus would be to check the mastery of the content rather than linguistic ability. So, I promote the use of the first language as well as the official language – English.

This teacher's sentiments show that the teachers deliberately promoted translanguaging for the benefit of their learners, although that contradicted the dictate of policy that from Grade 4 onwards, English must be used as the LOTL. When probed further, the teachers argued that it was a necessary evil, because their concern centred on the mastery of the concepts, rather than on linguistic ability.

So, when the teachers explained content presented in English in Sesotho, they helped to develop learners' competence in understanding the history content, which is called translanguaging. Several studies, although not using history and English to make a case, explain that translanguaging can be used as an inclusive pedagogical practice to bring equal access to educational opportunities, and to facilitate student participation in classroom settings and mastery of content (Li, 2018; Meighan, 2023; Mutongoza et al., 2023; Tai, 2023). According to Tai (2023), translanguaging is the use of more than one language to enhance understanding, especially using the first language to elaborate what is intended to be said in the second language. This suggests that history learners may articulate themselves both in the English language and in their home languages, so that they can articulate their concerns well. This confirms the sociocultural theory, which encourages contextualisation and interaction among educational players, and accommodating learners' home language, making learning and teaching relevant to the everyday lives of learners. This study resonates with Tai and Wong (2023), who claim that translanguaging as a pedagogical approach encourages teachers and students to use their available multilingual, multimodal, multisensory and multisemiotic resources to challenge the monolingual language education policy, to equalise the hierarchy of languages in the classrooms, and to enable students' full participation in creating meanings during classroom interactions. Translanguaging practices have importance not only in broadening students' exposure to diverse languages, but also in improving comprehension and memory. For example, in a monolingual classroom setting, it is very easy for students to respond to questions or complete tasks without having fully grasped the material, because processing for meaning may not have taken place. Textbook passages might simply be copied or altered without demonstrating thorough understanding. This is less common with translanguaging, however, as it takes time to comprehend and assimilate a topic after reading about it in one language before speaking about it in another. This suggests that more emphasis needs to be placed on students' understanding of content when teaching history, rather than on flawless mastery of the language.

This finding also replicates several case studies done in South Africa which concluded that translanguaging practices, although not sanctioned by policy, were important and necessary in

supporting learners' opportunity to learn science and mathematics (Makalela, 2015; Maluleke, 2019; Probyn, 2019). For example, in a study by Probyn (2019), analysis of the data shows that the heteroglossic orientation to multilingualism and pedagogical translanguaging evident in the practice of one teacher was an important and necessary factor in supporting learners' opportunity to learn science. An earlier study by Makalela (2015) has also shown that translanguaging techniques used in the experimental class afforded the participants affective and social advantages, as well as a deep understanding of the content. We argue that although translanguaging is regarded as a deviation from a monolingual ideal, and as a source of conflict and tension from a South African policy perspective, it is highly functional in supporting epistemic access, mastery of content and reducing the tensions and alienation of learning through the medium of a strange language.

Conclusions

This study explored the challenges faced by learners when taught history in English, a language they did not speak outside school, and established how they wanted to be taught. The findings show that learners had a poor command of the English language, and hence performed poorly in assignments and tasks. Learners then suggested that history teachers adopt translanguaging and scaffolding activities to enhance mastery of history content. These findings suggest the urgent need for schools through the Department of Education in South Africa, and in any other countries with similar contexts, to embrace scaffolding and translanguaging as pedagogical approaches in teaching history for understanding, rather than for uniformity. The study proposes that in countries where history is taught in English to African-language-speaking learners, the education systems can begin the difficult but critical work of reimagining and re-forming policies on the language of teaching and learning by recognising that if we want our learners to understand the history curriculum, it cannot be taught in English independently of other languages spoken in the communities in which schools are located. The study concludes that while we acknowledge that subject matter in schools is constructed in language that differs from the language we use to interact with each other in daily life, more emphasis needs to be placed on students' understanding of history content, rather than on flawless mastery of the English language. In this way, we would take heed of what Wahlberg (2006) warns when she argues that we must not create a situation where these learners become doubly abused, in that they are inefficient in the English language while they try to master history. Through this, they should not also be in a situation where they battle with historical understanding and historical developmental skills. Consequently, in the race for the development of twenty-first-century skills, accepting diversity and translanguaging is not a choice but a survival skill in the teaching of history. Apart from the fact that translanguaging helps to ensure inclusion and a sense of belonging in our schools, it also serves to remove teaching and learning barriers, as well as to facilitate better communication, understanding and uptake of the knowledge we produce. Although this study has successfully demonstrated that history can be taught with other languages to enhance learners' understanding, it has certain limitations in terms of the small sample size used; caution must therefore be applied, as the findings may not be generalisable. Additionally, the implications of using translanguaging as a pedagogical approach when it comes to assessment have not been explored. Despite that, this is foundational work paving the way for future exciting research on teaching history using the English language to African-language-speaking learners.

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Open data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of the Free State, Faculty of Education Ethics Board, protocol reference number UFS-HDS2022/1893/23.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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