



THE
**LEARNING
TRUST**
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

DESIGNING AND REFINING METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT



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INTRODUCTION

The Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) Community of Practice (CoP) in South Africa continues to grow as a collective space of learning and innovation.

As practitioners working to address South Africa's foundational learning crisis, we see TaRL's potential daily; not only to close learning gaps but to restore learners' confidence and curiosity, enabling meaningful engagement with the mainstream programme design.

In November 2025, partners gathered to explore a critical question:

How do we design and refine TaRL programmes that respond to context while remaining practical, effective and inclusive?



Building on earlier discussions about programme impact measurement [May] and contextualisation [August], this session turned inward to ask: How do we know that what and how we teach truly meets learners' needs?

Facilitated by Sarah Fry from Axiom Education, the conversation encouraged honest reflection on programme design dilemmas, the trade-offs, assumptions and feedback loops that shape real classroom implementation.



Image: Accelerated Learning Projects' Training and Programme Manager, Sinazo Didiza, conducting a TaRL facilitator training with iThemba Projects Facilitators in Sweetwaters)



FRAMING OUR SHARED CHALLENGE

Programmes Design

Programme design decisions shape every aspect of TaRL implementation: session content, facilitator training, materials and ultimately, learner experience.

Yet designing programme design for TaRL presents distinct challenges:

- Limited time and resources
- Diverse implementation contexts
- The urgency of catch-up learning
- Different stakeholder expectations
- South Africa's language diversity
- A shifting policy landscape, including Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education

This learning brief distils key insights across four dimensions of TaRL programme design work.

Programme design Aims Must Be Clear and Evolving

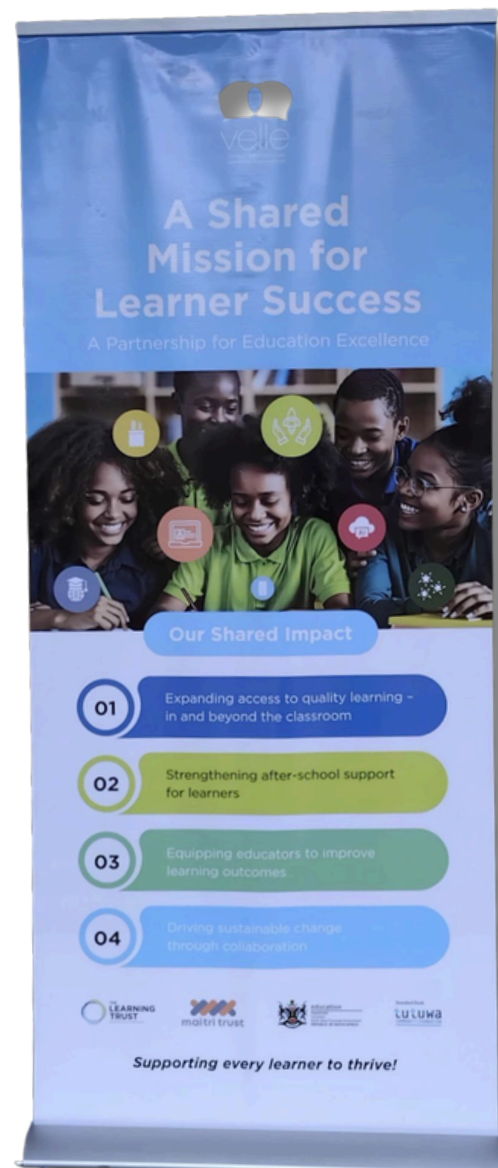
Every TaRL learning programme design is shaped by a set of aims, whether they are explicitly articulated or implicitly assumed. These aims influence practical decisions: which skills are prioritised, how learning progressions are structured, what materials are developed, and how facilitators are trained.

When programme aims are unclear or too broad, teams may interpret the purpose of TaRL differently, leading to inconsistent implementation. Conversely, when aims are clearly defined, they provide a shared direction for instructional design and classroom practice. As programme goals evolve in response to evidence or context, the learning programme must evolve alongside them

When asked to summarise their programme aims in a few words, practitioners offered varied responses ranging from **“establishing foundations”** and **“closing learning gaps”** to **“building learner confidence”** and **“achieving foundational mastery.”**

This diversity of framing suggests that while implementing partners share a commitment to improving foundational learning, they may prioritise different outcomes within their TaRL implementation. Such variation can influence how programmes are designed and delivered.

For the Community of Practice, this raises an important reflection: how can implementing partners maintain a shared understanding of TaRL’s core purpose while still allowing programme implementation to respond to their specific contexts?



Programme design Evolution in Practice

Axiom Education's Isicasho literacy programme illustrated how aims shift over time:

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PHASE 1:

Develop a love for learning: While inspiring, this goal proved too broad to guide daily instructional decisions, leading to variation in how facilitators interpreted the programme.

PHASE 2:

Focus on phonics, decoding, fluency. After observing early implementation and learner progress, the team sharpened their focus toward measurable literacy foundations: phonics, decoding, and reading fluency. This clearer instructional focus strengthened lesson design and facilitator support.

PHASE 3:

Integrating comprehension: Over time, the team recognised that fluency alone did not ensure understanding. The programme therefore expanded to incorporate structured comprehension work alongside decoding and fluency.

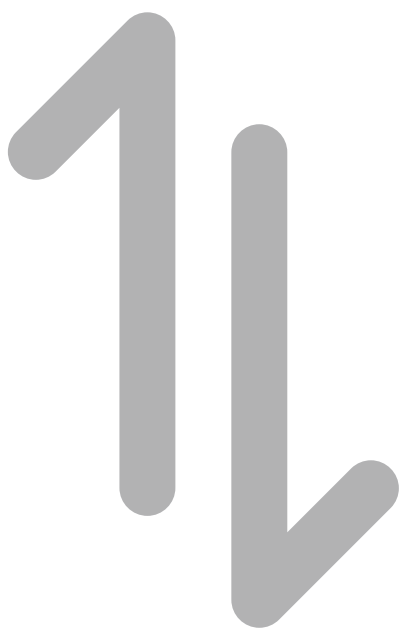
This evolution demonstrates that programme design aims must be living commitments, responsive to evidence and experience. Moving from broad aims to actionable decisions requires answering concrete questions about which gaps, which skills, and which standards matter.

Every Programme design Decision Involves Trade-Offs

In a context of limited time, resources and varying facilitator capacity, choosing to include something means choosing not to include something else. The challenge is whether these trade-offs are made consciously.

Part of making Trade-Offs well includes:

- **Naming the trade-offs openly**
- **Understanding gains and losses**
- **Aligning choices with aims**
- **Documenting reasoning**
- **Revisiting decisions regularly**
- **Communicating trade-offs to stakeholders**



Examples from the field

Coverage vs depth: Covering all English phonics risks overwhelming learners; prioritising fewer sounds risks gaps.

Scripting vs flexibility: Highly scripted plans offer consistency but reduce responsiveness; lighter scripts require strong facilitator skill. Sarah noted that simplifying lesson plans too much left facilitators feeling unsupported; more detail sometimes brings clarity.

Language dilemmas: Facilitators often lack technical maths terms in learners' home languages. Teams developing programme design may not share the language profiles of rural sites, making meaningful translation and contextualisation difficult.

Regrouping vs progression: Regrouping based on assessment can interrupt systematic phonics sequences, raising questions about how TaRL's non-linear grouping intersects with subjects requiring ordered progression.

Linearity assumptions: it was highlighted that TaRL's level-based structure assumes linear learning, while real learning is iterative. Yet more complexity risks "scope creep," diluting TaRL's strength: simplicity.



Language and Contextualisation Are Central

Language emerged once again as a central challenge. In the TaRL collaborative infrastructure, it is becoming even more evident that multilingual implementation requires true adaptation, not simple translation.

How these challenges manifest in practice:



Technical mathematics terms often lack familiar equivalents in learners' home languages.



Stories and contextual examples sometimes reflect urban or English-speaking realities that differ from learners' lived experiences.



Phonics approaches developed for English cannot always be directly transferred to African languages with different linguistic structures.



Code-switching frequently occurs during instruction, yet this practice is rarely formally reflected in programme design.



Considerations for TaRL learning programme design

These realities suggest several considerations for organisations implementing TaRL:

- Ensuring linguistic expertise within programme design teams
- Collaborating with communities and educators to contextualise examples and language
- Adapting phonics approaches to align with the structure of specific languages
- Acknowledging code-switching as a practical instructional strategy rather than an implementation failure

These challenges also reflect broader systemic dynamics within South Africa's education landscape. Language decisions are influenced not only by organisational capacity but also by teacher preparation, mainstream curriculum policy, community language practices and national reforms such as Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education.

For programmes such as TaRL, this means that contextualisation cannot be addressed solely at the organisational level. Instead, it requires alignment with educators, communities, and policy developments across the broader education ecosystem.



Feedback Loops Drive Programme design Quality

TaRL assessments play a critical role in identifying learners' current levels and tracking progress. However, assessment data alone does not always explain why learners struggle with certain concepts or which aspects of the learning programme may require adjustment.

Understanding these deeper questions often requires additional feedback from classroom implementation, facilitator observations, and learner experiences. Strengthening these feedback loops helps programme teams refine instructional materials and approaches more effectively.

STRENGTHENING FEEDBACK LOOPS

1 The messenger matters: Fred from Youth Impact stressed that those gathering feedback must understand and have implemented the programme design themselves; otherwise, feedback becomes inconsistent and unusable.

2 Multiple voices: Facilitators, learners, coaches, classroom teachers, and developers each reveal different insights. Learners' **"student voice"** is especially valuable for understanding confusion or breakthrough moments.

3 Developers in classrooms: Testing materials in real settings helps uncover weaknesses early. Axiom's maths experience showed the challenges of applying one programme design across Grades 4–9.

4 Systematic documentation: Routine observations, reflection cycles, and pattern analysis help transform anecdotal insights into actionable improvements.

Emerging Directions for TaRL Programme Design

While many of the questions raised during this Community of Practice session remain open, partners also highlighted several promising directions for strengthening TaRL learning programmes in South Africa.

These include:

- Clarifying programme aims so that facilitators, mentors, and designers share a common understanding of learning priorities based on the needs of the group.
- Making instructional trade-offs explicitly clear, enabling teams to align design decisions with programme goals.


- Deepening contextualisation, particularly through language adaptation and locally relevant materials.
- Strengthening feedback loops between classrooms and programme designers to ensure materials evolve based on real learner experience.

These efforts mirror broader conversations within South Africa's education ecosystem as government and partners work toward improving foundational learning. In this context, TaRL offers a practical approach through which organisations can experiment, learn, and contribute to national learning recovery efforts.

The Bigger Picture: TaRL and Learning Recovery

The TaRL programme design choices shape contribution to national learning recovery efforts, evidence-building, policy alignment, and district-scale sustainability.

Programme design is where vision becomes lived experience for learners.



All of these conversations are ultimately about improving the lives of children who might not otherwise receive support if it were not for programmes like TaRL. We walk this journey together.”

**—Yolisa Shugu, Projects Director,
The Learning Trust**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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