



THE
**LEARNING
TRUST**
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

**LANGUAGE AND LEARNING:
CONSIDERATIONS FOR TARL IN
BI/MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS**



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INTRODUCTION

South Africa's foundational learning crisis remains deeply intertwined with language. While earlier models of Language of Learning and Teaching and Assessment (LoLTA) were characterised by a relatively abrupt transition to English in the intermediate phase, current policy increasingly supports a more incremental introduction of English, with the proportion of English used for teaching and learning gradually increasing across grades.

However, despite this shift in policy direction, many learners continue to experience this transition as a significant barrier. Learners typically enter school speaking an African language at home, and as English is introduced more prominently, they are simultaneously expected to move from learning to read toward reading for meaning.

In multilingual contexts where learners may navigate multiple home languages and varying levels of exposure to English, this transition remains complex.

Within the TaRL Community of Practice, there is an increasing recognition that addressing foundational learning gaps requires not only effective pedagogy but also a deeper understanding of how language morphology shapes learning.

Building on earlier TaRL Community of Practice Learning Briefs on evidence, contextualised implementation, and responsive curriculum and pedagogy, the CoP recently turned its attention to this question:

How can multilingual approaches strengthen teaching and learning within TaRL interventions and the broader education system?

The session featured insights from Dr. Xolisa Guzula, a Senior Lecturer in Applied Language and Literacy Studies at the University of Cape Town, whose research and practice focus on multilingual education and development, and translanguaging pedagogies in South African classrooms.

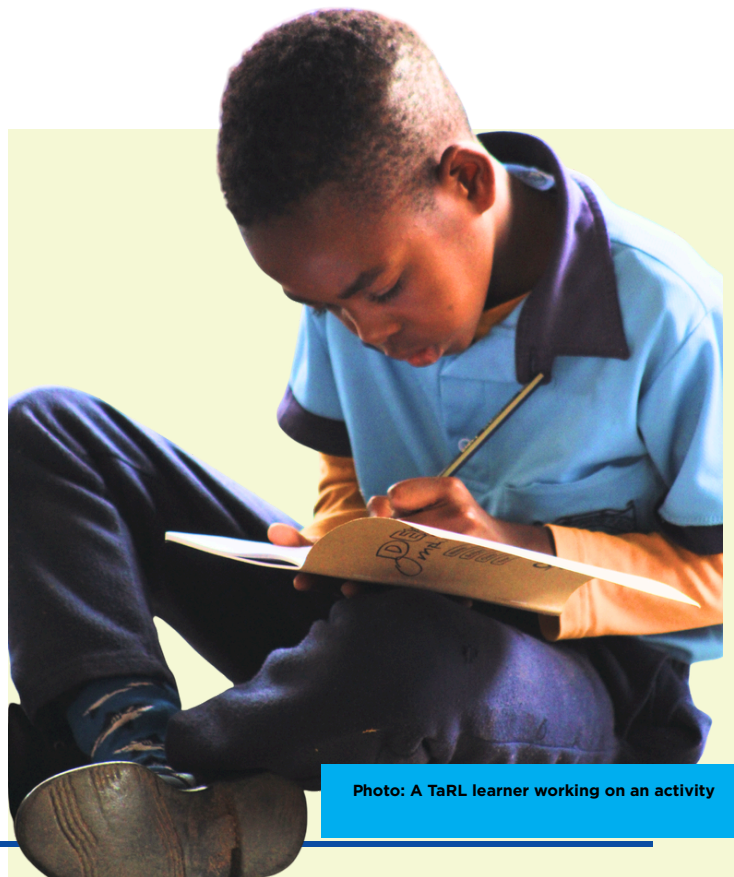


Photo: A TaRL learner working on an activity

UNDERSTANDING MOTHER TONGUE-BASED BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education, an approach in which learners begin learning in their home language and gradually acquire additional languages as mediums of instruction, differs slightly from Mother Tongue-Based Reading Literacy, which places greater emphasis on breaking reading-for-meaning barriers for learners transitioning to English from African languages (reference).

Both approaches share a core principle: learners' home languages are not barriers but a vital foundation for learning. In the Community of Practice discussion, this is especially relevant to how language can be more intentionally integrated into TaRL design and delivery. Rather than replacing home language with English, the model builds on learners' familiar language while introducing English gradually.

Decades of research show that starting in familiar languages strengthens conceptual understanding, especially in early literacy. Scholars such as [Kathleen Heugh](#) have consistently highlighted the value of mother-tongue instruction for comprehension, participation, and long-term learning outcomes.

This aligns with South Africa's Language in Education Policy and recent Department of Basic Education efforts to strengthen multilingual education and foundational literacy. It also challenges the long-standing belief that learners must be taught only in English to succeed academically.



Photo: Bonthle from Velle demonstrates an activity to learners.

TRANSLANGUAGING

A central theme was translanguaging: the flexible use of multiple languages in teaching and learning. Unlike traditional **“code-switching,”** which treats languages as separate, translanguaging centres on meaning-making. Learners and teachers draw on all their language resources to explain ideas, discuss concepts, and build understanding.

In practice, this may include the following:

Learners discussing ideas in their home language before presenting in English

Teachers explaining complex ideas in more than one language

Learners writing in more than one language

Bilingual materials that support understanding



This shifts the classroom focus from linguistic correctness to deeper understanding, and it is often already happening informally in classrooms and after-school programmes, where facilitators naturally move between languages to support understanding.

EVIDENCE EMERGING FROM MULTILINGUAL PRACTICE

Research and classroom experiences shared during the session highlighted several benefits of multilingual learning environments. Learners who can engage with content in their home language often demonstrate:

- Stronger conceptual understanding
- increased classroom participation
- improved confidence and engagement
- Stronger connections between learning and lived experience

Evidence from bilingual assessment pilots also suggests that learners perform significantly better when they are able to demonstrate their understanding using languages they are comfortable with.

“For us, this also means training our facilitators to think, plan lessons and deliver them bilingually. Is there a way we can help keep this at the fore of our TaRL design?”

- TaRL Implementing Partner



IMPLICATIONS FOR TARL IMPLEMENTATION

The discussion raised important considerations for Teaching at the Right Level implementation in South Africa.

1. Language Matters for Foundational Learning

TaRL works best when teaching responds to learners' actual level of understanding rather than age or grade. In multilingual contexts, language shapes whether learners can show that understanding.

In foundational literacy and numeracy, limited proficiency in the Language of Learning and Teaching can mask conceptual understanding.

Multilingual approaches can therefore support more accurate assessment, levelling, and participation. CoP reflections also suggest that many TaRL facilitators already use multilingual strategies informally during group work, assessments, and learning activities to support comprehension and confidence.

2. Facilitators Need Support for Multilingual Teaching

Many facilitators have not received formal training in multilingual pedagogy. Supporting TaRL implementation may therefore require:

- practical guidance on translanguaging strategies
- bilingual teaching materials
- professional learning opportunities for facilitators

Building this capacity will be essential as MTbBE expands across the education system.

3. Learning Materials Must Reflect Linguistic Contexts

Successful multilingual learning requires more than translation. Teaching materials must reflect learners' linguistic, cultural, and, where relevant, socio-economic realities.

This includes:

- bilingual glossaries and concept dictionaries
- multilingual storybooks and learning texts
- lesson plans that intentionally integrate multiple languages

These adaptations echo earlier CoP discussions on the importance of contextualising TaRL design.



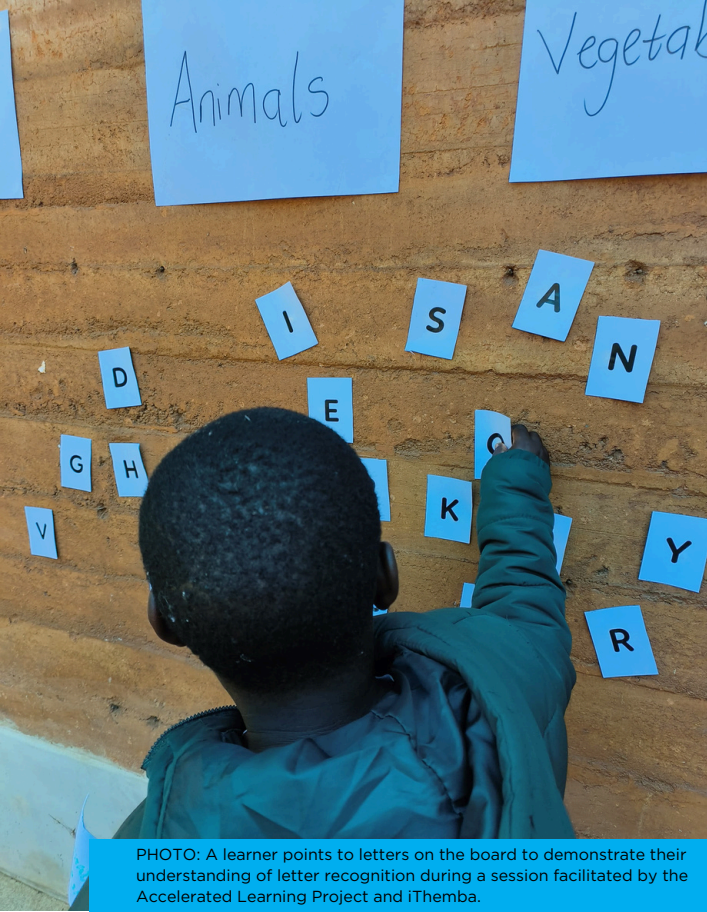


PHOTO: A learner points to letters on the board to demonstrate their understanding of letter recognition during a session facilitated by the Accelerated Learning Project and iThemba.

4. After School Programmes Can Model Multilingual Practice

This discussion highlights the important role of after-school and community-based programmes in modelling practical, responsive multilingual learning. Compared with formal classrooms, they give facilitators more flexibility to adapt instruction and respond to learners' linguistic and socio-economic realities, meeting learners at their current level of understanding.

This makes them not only complementary learning spaces but also important sites of innovation.

For The Learning Trust and our Strategic Implementing Partners, lessons from these contexts offer valuable insights into multilingual pedagogy, facilitator support and curriculum adaptation in both after-school programmes and the broader education system.

GRACE TO FAIL, LEARN AND IMPROVE

A recurring reflection was that multilingual education is a long-term, evolving process. Although South Africa has spent decades refining English-medium instruction, inequalities in learning and access persist. Moving toward multilingual approaches therefore requires more than policy change; it calls for ongoing experimentation, adaptation, capacity building, and collective learning.

There is a need to give the whole ecosystem “grace to fail and improve” as educators, organisations, researchers, and policymakers explore what effective multilingual implementation looks like. Both bi-/multilingual education and TaRL implementation therefore require a willingness to test, reflect, adapt, and improve over time.

“We have allowed ourselves to fail and improve in English. We must also allow ourselves the grace to fail and improve in multilingual education.”

- Dr Xolisa Guzula



LEARNING AND PRACTICE

As the TaRL Community of Practice has evolved, a clear progression has emerged. Early discussions focused on evidence, measurement and contextualising TaRL within South Africa's diverse education realities. Later conversations examined curriculum responsiveness, implementation adaptation and partnerships for sustainable improvement.

This discussion on multilingual learning builds on those themes by showing how language shapes access, participation, comprehension and assessment. It reinforced that improving foundational learning in South Africa requires approaches that are evidence-informed, linguistically responsive and grounded in learners' contexts.

The opportunity now is to strengthen links between research, policy and practice by improving multilingual pedagogy, generating implementation evidence and sustaining partnerships that support equitable foundational learning. Through this ongoing reflection and adaptation, the CoP continues to contribute to a more responsive and inclusive education system.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



The Learning Trust extends its sincere gratitude to Dr. Xolisa Guzula for facilitating this Community of Practice session and for so generously sharing her insights and expertise. We are deeply appreciative of her contribution to advancing our collective learning and strengthening our understanding of what meaningful, context-responsive bi/Multilingual considerations look like.



PREVIOUS LEARNING BRIEFS:

This learning brief is linked to a series of other conversations that are forming a thread of the TaRL Community of Practice learnings. Click on the links below to read more.

TaRL Learning Brief Issue 1

[Measuring Programme impact](#)

TaRL Learning Brief Issue 2

[Adapting To Local Contexts And Fostering Collaboration](#)

TaRL Learning Brief Issue 3

[Designing And Refining Methodology And Tools For South African Context](#)



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