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Chapter

# Teachers' Practices for Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties in Linguistically Diverse Primary Classes

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## Abstract

Cultural and linguistic diversity is a common feature across sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa is not an exception. With high levels of linguistic diversity in this context and language constituting a barrier to learning, it is important to understand the instructional communicative strategies used by teachers to support students with specific learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The study was conducted using a survey design and semi-structured interviews to collect data on the teachers' awareness, preparation and strategies used with diverse students. The participants were 47 primary school teachers in Pretoria, South Africa. The data was analysed to identify the effective strategies used by the teachers. The findings revealed that the teachers employed cooperative learning, grouping and explicit vocabulary instruction as strategies with the students. Although the majority of the teachers indicated that they felt competent to support the students' needs in terms of curriculum and standards, cultural differences and socio-emotional development, they still believe that more focused teacher professional development programmes, support from other professional and additional resources were required for better student achievement.

**Keywords:** linguistic diversity, language of instruction, student support, teaching and learning strategies, primary school learners

## 1. Introduction

South Africa is a diverse country with 12 official languages including the Sign Language. Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in education, specifically when teaching and learning have to take place in the students' second or third language, can create challenges for both teachers and students. Without the necessary support, these language challenges can also lead to learning difficulties across the curriculum. It is important for students to attain a certain level of mastery of the language of instruction, predominantly English, to enable them to progress academically. This is one of the challenges that students at the primary school level who are English Language learners (ELL) are faced with when being taught in English as their primary language

of instruction. The students are often not able to effectively engage with the content and the teachers find it difficult at times to explain concepts in English, which in some instances is also the teachers' second or third language.

It is common knowledge that teachers in linguistically diverse classrooms employ various strategies such as code-switching, code-mixing, direct instruction and translanguaging to assist students to better understand the content which is being presented to them. According to Richard Nordquist [1], code-switching is the method of swapping between different dialects of a language or, even, changing between two or more different languages. Research indicates that code-switching can be perceived as either an advantage or a disadvantage. Translanguaging is another strategy used in linguistically diverse classrooms and utilises two languages to mediate and arrange mental processes in learning, as defined by Rosemary Wildsmith-Cromarty [2]. As defined by Garcia [3, 4], translanguaging is a unitary meaning-making system of the speakers in which multiple discursive practices are used to understand the bilingual world and to create a space where the students make use of all their linguistic and semiotic repertoire [5]. *"It is the process by which bilingual students make use of the many resources their bilingual status offers"* ([6], p. 559). During a study of translanguaging, the students were allowed to write their essays, assessments and examinations in a language of their choice. This, in itself, can be considered another strategy as students identified that writing in the language of their choice allowed them to express themselves confidently and clearly [2].

According to the PIRLS 2021 study on literacy levels, approximately 81 per cent of South African Grade 4 students do not reach the international benchmark for literacy and, therefore, do not have the basic reading skills to proceed to the next grade. This is an indication that more needs to be done to support language development and access to curriculum content. Conversely, there are pockets of success recorded regularly. Not much research has been directed towards investigating and disseminating the strategies which teachers use to effectively support and accommodate learning in linguistically diverse classrooms. There is a need to tap into these successes and best practices and explore how these can be used to further strengthen teacher professional development programmes. Consequently, the research question for the study was "What are teachers' instructional and support strategies for facilitating learning in linguistically diverse primary classes?"

## **2. Literature review**

Internationally, literature on teaching strategies for linguistically diverse classrooms is a growing field of research. Most of the bilingual educational strategies, used globally, encourage a strict separation of the languages taught [7]. In this approach, bilingualism is treated almost as a double monolingualism [7]. The introduction of an interactional approach to bilingual teaching, such as translanguaging, is a more contemporary approach to teaching ([5, 7], p. 23).

The concept of translanguaging first appeared in the nineteen-eighties in Welsh Education when the separation between Welsh and English became evident as different languages [8]. In order to avoid English being the dominant language, the Welsh found it acceptable to merge both languages [8]. In the European and North American context, sociocultural and linguistic diversity has become a new focus in research as a result of the rise in immigrant populations in European and North American cities [8]. Researchers in the United Kingdom and the United States of America now look for examples of social interactions outside of classrooms that treat the linguistic

diversity of students “as resources rather than as problems” ([8], p. 348), [9]. In South Africa and other African countries, however, challenges around socio-economic, cultural and linguistic diversity have long been prevalent ([8], p. 348).

Educational institutions in South Africa seek to combat these low literacy levels, as evidenced in the PIRLS study (2016), by introducing alternative teaching strategies using the 11 official languages ([2], p. 101). “Parallel monolingualism” is used to describe teaching strategies where two or more standard languages are used as the language of instruction while keeping the two languages separate ([8], p. 351). This can be seen in a study performed by Lara-Stephanie Krause and Mastin Prinsloo [8], where mathematics classrooms in township schools in the Western Cape taught most numbers in English. The isiXhosa prefix of each number was added before the English number name in order to mix the two languages ([8], p. 351). In contrast to this, Wildsmith Cromarty [2] describes a study that utilises two complementary languages for instruction, in a third-year humanities course. This use of both languages is what is referred to as translanguaging ([2], p. 103). The two languages utilised in the study are English and IsiZulu. The content of the work, in the Wildsmith Cromarty [2] study, was presented to students mainly in English, with IsiZulu being utilised to expand, explain and clarify key concepts ([2], p. 102). Both languages, in the course, were eventually utilised simultaneously for most functions.

Research has shown that if teachers do not understand the fundamental role that language plays in the classroom, then effective communication between the teachers and students is bound to break down ([10], p. 373). From the study, it is evident that teachers who are prepared for linguistic diversity in classrooms (through pre-teacher training as well as continual professional development on the matter) are needed in order to facilitate effective learning in linguistically diverse classrooms. Linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom, as well as strategies to deal with the challenges this brings, is still in its research infancy ([10], p. 373).

International and national studies demonstrate that translanguaging is a common term and strategy utilised by teachers in multilingual classrooms in order to combat the challenges that arise from teaching in such a diverse environment. The extent to which translanguaging is being utilised in linguistically diverse classrooms is still limited. Heugh et al. [11] found that, in assessment, translanguaging was a useful strategy, in that, students’ performance improved ([11], p. 202). Also, they experienced the assessment process more positively ([11], p. 212). Rosemary Wildsmith-Cromarty [2] also conducted a study in which the results highlighted an improvement in student understanding of coursework when translanguaging was utilised as a strategy in the classroom. Along with this, it was also found that students were able to better explain themselves in assessments ([2], p. 114). In South Africa, as it is still a new area of research, there was very little information regarding collated teaching strategies which can effectively be implemented in linguistically diverse classrooms. The problem that this poses, is that, without known effective teaching strategies, teachers still require training and support in order to facilitate effective learning in linguistically diverse classrooms.

This study draws on Vygotsky’s social development theory which was created in 1962 ([12], p. 6). Vygotsky’s social development theory applies to mental development which includes thought, language and the reasoning process. A major aspect of Vygotsky’s social development theory is the influence of an adult or more able other in mediating learning and creating scaffolding for the learner. Mark Warford [13] highlights that scaffolding is utilised to help students reach their highest proximal level of development. Scaffolding is considered most effective when it has been designed and adapted for the student. In response to the student’s development, scaffolding is adapted and, eventually, it is withdrawn ([14], p. 1551). Scaffolding in this instance



would, thus, be synonymous with the different approaches that teachers utilise in their classrooms (e.g. code switching and code mixing) that ensure that students are supported to reach their full potential.

### **3. Methodology**

The purpose of this study, which was part of a larger international project, was to investigate which instructional strategies primary school teachers in Pretoria utilise within their linguistically diverse classrooms, as well as which strategies they perceived as being effective and could promote learning in linguistically diverse primary school classrooms. A convergent mixed-methods design was used to examine various techniques which teachers employ in order to overcome the teaching challenges presented by linguistically diverse primary classrooms. As stated by Maree [15], convergent mixed-methods design is one of the most well-known mixed-methods designs and is utilised by researchers to develop an adequate and more complete understanding of the phenomena which is being researched. Convergent mixed-methods design is the process of merging, analysing and collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously [16], which is considered most appropriate for the research when the goal is to collect both data sets simultaneously and merge the different results, in order to draw a single conclusion [15]. Participants were interviewed in order to allow the researcher to gain information about their views, ideas, behaviours, opinions and beliefs [17].

Purposive sampling was used to select the sample of one hundred and fifty participants for the surveys from 10 schools and 8 primary school teachers were interviewed. The following criteria were used to determine the eligibility of participants to be chosen to take part in the study: they should be qualified primary school teachers and should have at least 5 years of teaching experience, they should be teaching in linguistically diverse primary classes, they should have utilised teaching strategies to overcome language barriers in the classroom and they should be willing to share their personal experiences and opinions for the purpose of the research study.

Institutional ethics approval was obtained and informed consent forms were completed by the participating teacher. They were made fully aware of the aim of the research, and also that participation was voluntary and that there were no repercussions for non-participation.

#### **3.1 Survey and interviews**

The survey was self-developed by a group of researchers in the larger study, piloted and refined thereafter. The survey instrument consisted of five parts and a total of 31 questions. Part 1 focused on demographic information; Part II—Preparation for Teaching Diverse Language Students; Part III—Additional Learning for Teaching Diverse Language Students; Part IV—Professional Development for Teaching Diverse Language Students; Part V—Instruction for Diverse Language Learners. Teachers had the option to either complete the surveys in hard-copy format or *via* an online survey platform. Schools will be contacted, prior to the distribution of the surveys, to determine the teachers' preference for either hard-copy surveys or digital surveys, accessed online. The survey data were analysed using a description of trends and a statistical analysis system was to address the research questions [16]. First, descriptive analysis was conducted, followed by inferential analysis, to have a more complete understanding of the data by drawing comparisons between the surveys.

The teachers who were interviewed were selected from the sample of those who completed the questionnaires, and as a result, the demographics from attained from the questionnaire represent the overall sample. The interviews took place in the participants' classrooms at their school and at a time that best suited the teacher. The interview comprised of six questions focused on understanding the teacher accommodations of the students in their linguistically diverse classrooms. The intention was to gather information, which represents the participants' worldviews and experiences. The interviews lasted 30 minutes and, with the permission of the participants, were recorded.

The data analysis included verbatim transcriptions of the recordings. The transcriptions were coded and categorised, and deductive thematic analysis was used to determine the emergent themes [18]. The data analysis software program, NVivo [16] was used for the coding of the data by storing and labelling segments to analyse the relationship between them.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Survey

#### 4.1.1 Part I: Demographics

The response rate for the survey was about 40%. Of the 47 teachers that participated in the survey, 98% were female, and 2% were male. The participants' ages ranged between 25 and 60 years. The majority of the participants (68%) were between the ages of 31 and 55 years. The participants' years of teaching experience ranged between 5 and 30 years, and 83% of them considered themselves bi-/multilingual. In addition to the South African official languages, other languages spoken by the teachers include Hindu, Tamil and Gujarati (**Figure 1**).

In their response to their preparedness for teaching diverse language students, during their professional education, 21% disagreed, 28% felt neutral and 51% agreed/strongly agreed that they were properly prepared for teaching diverse teaching. The majority of teachers (71%) felt that their professional education course made them more aware of the need for linguistic and cultural diversity in education 4% strongly disagreed, 11% disagreed and 14% were neutral. In also enquiring whether their professional education courses had equipped them with strategies for teaching diverse language students, 18% disagreed, 36% felt neutral, 29% agreed and 18% strongly agreed (**Figure 2**).

The teachers unanimously agreed that more professional development and resources were required for supporting linguistically diverse students.

#### 4.1.2 Instruction for diverse language students

To the questions pertaining to how many hours of in-service professional development teachers typically participate in each year, 14% per cent indicated 0–5 hours, 29% for 5–10 hours, 36% for 10–20 hours, and 4% for 30–40 hours and 18% indicated that they have had training for more than 40 hours. In the past 5 years, if any teachers have participated in professional development that primarily focuses on the needs of ELLs, 37% indicated yes, 55% said no and 7% were not sure. Regarding participation of participants in the in-service professional development

### Preparation for teaching diverse language students

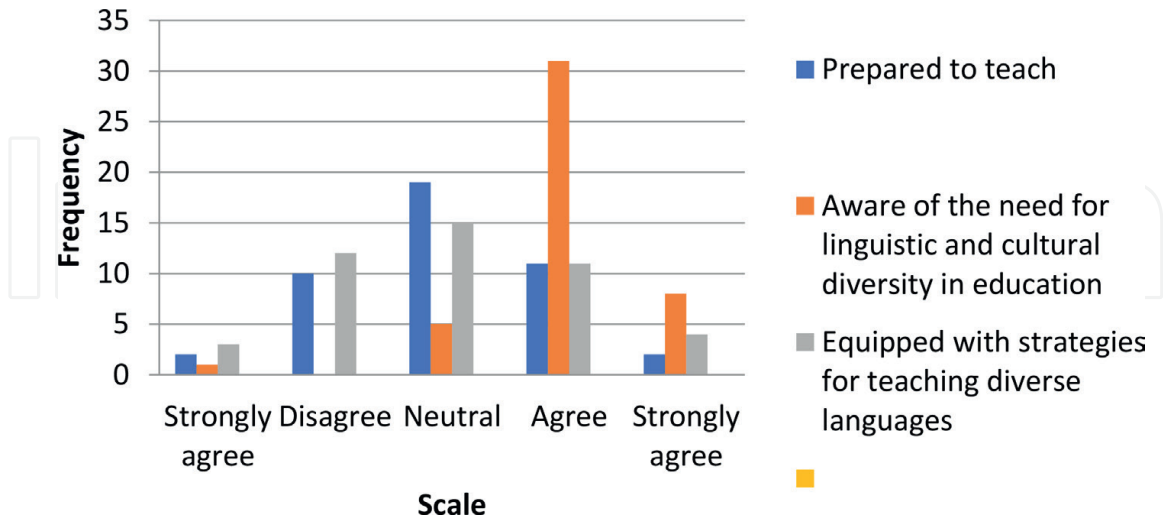


Figure 1. Preparation for teaching diverse language students.

### Additional learning for teaching diverse languages learners

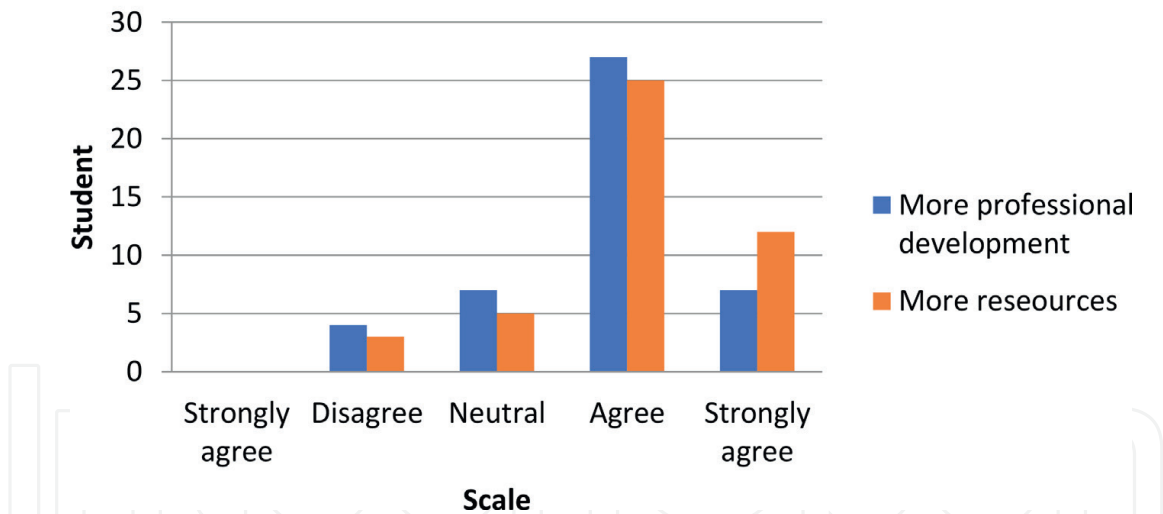


Figure 2. Additional learning for teaching diverse language students.

that addresses the needs of ELLs in part, but not primarily focusing on the topic, 41% said no, 37% indicated yes and 22% were not sure. In terms of the number of hours of professional development that fully or partially addressed the needs of ELLs they participated, 60% indicated 0–5 hours, 19% were 5–10 hours, 15% 10–20 hours, 4% 30–40 hours and 4% with more than 40 hours (Figure 3).

When asked concerning ELL students, if teachers felt competent to meet their students’ needs according to differences between cultures 4% felt highly incompetent, 22% felt incompetent, 7% indicated that they did not know, 59% felt competent and 7% felt highly competent. For accommodations and modifications for ELL students, 22% felt incompetent, 11% indicated that they did not know, 59% felt competent

### Do you feel competent to meet your students' needs?

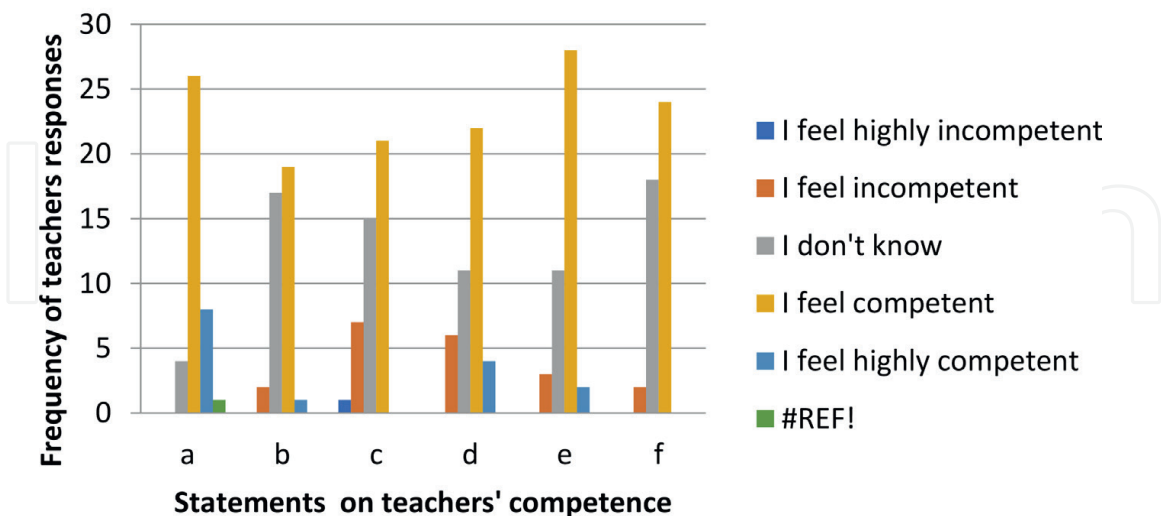


Figure 3.  
 Instruction for diverse language students.

and 7% felt highly competent. With regard to strategies and best practices for ELL students 31% felt incompetent, 19% said that they do not know, 46% felt competent and 4% felt highly competent. When incorporating knowledge of students' culture in instruction 22% felt incompetent, 30% indicated that they did not know, 37% felt competent and 11% felt highly competent. With the social and emotional development of ELL students, 15% felt incompetent, 4% indicated that they did not know, 74% felt that they were competent and 7% indicated that they felt highly competent (Figures 4 and 5).

### I modify my instruction to assist ELLs

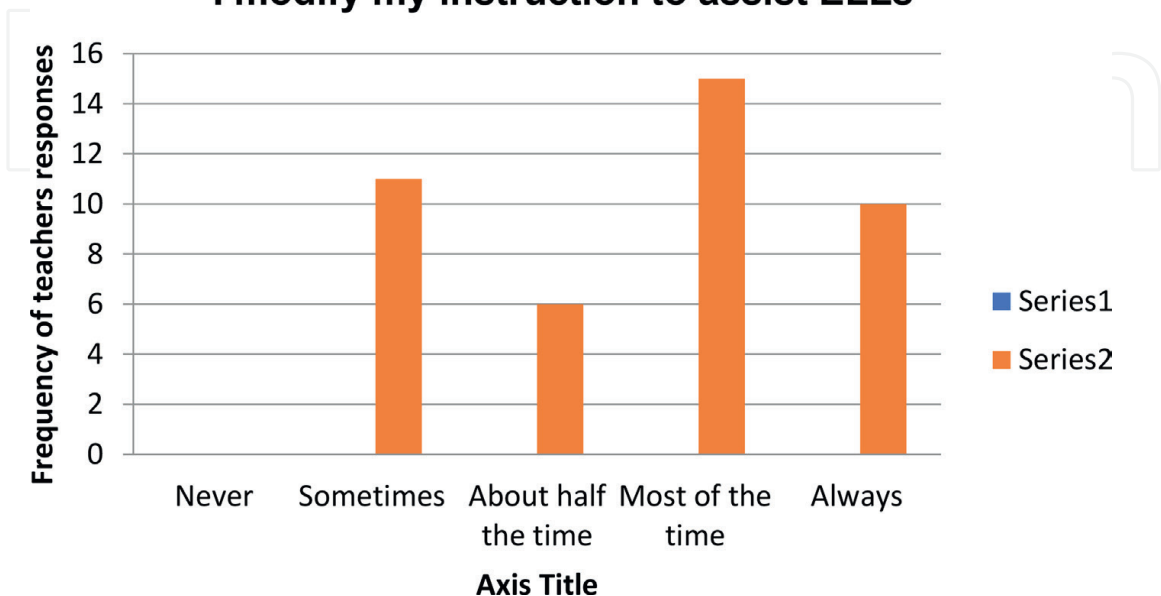


Figure 4.  
 Modification of instruction.



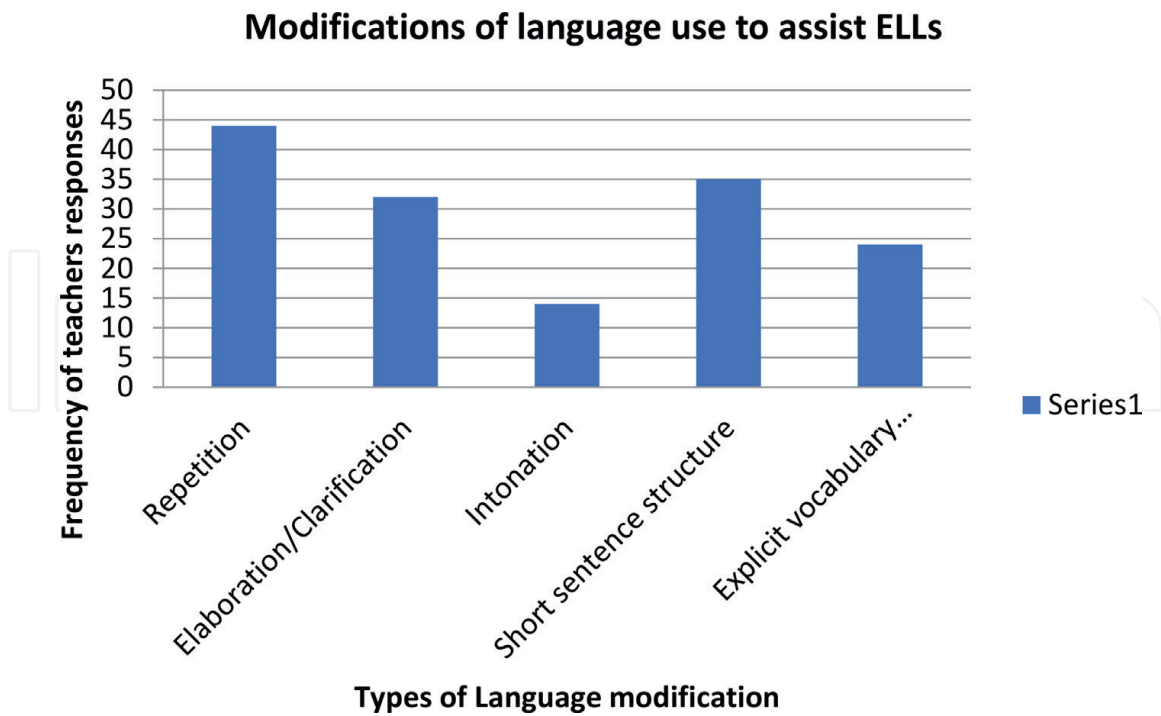


Figure 5.  
Language use.

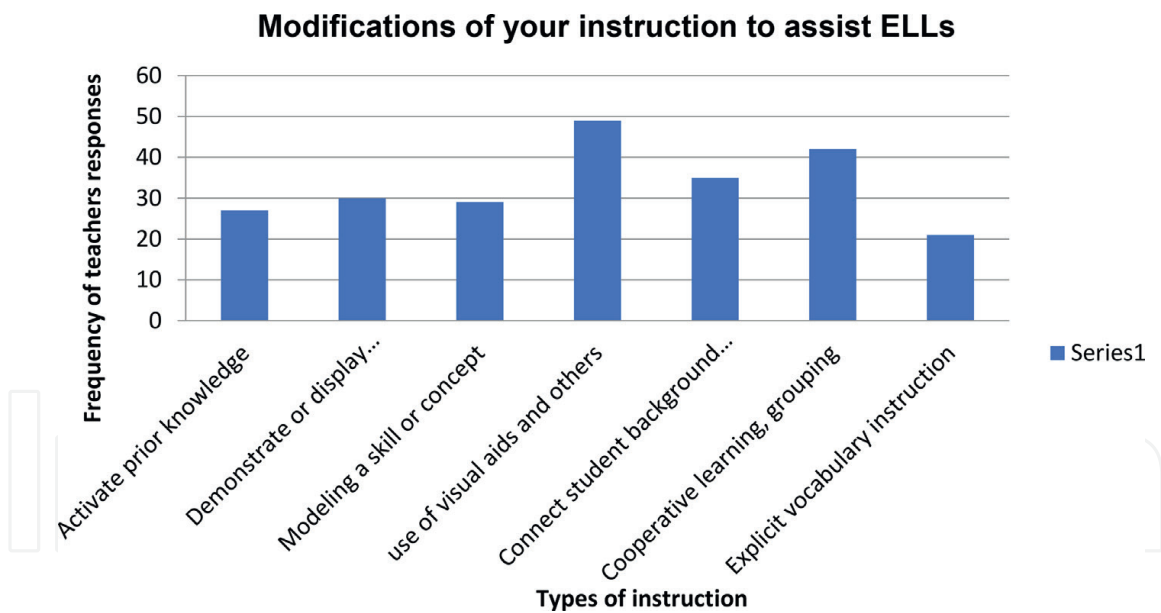


Figure 6.  
Types of modifications.

With ELL curriculum and language proficiency standards, 30% indicated that they feel incompetent, 15% said that they do not know, 48% feels competent and 7% feel highly competent (Figure 6).

When asked if teachers modify their instruction to assist ELLs 7% said never, 15% said sometimes, 37% said about half the time, 30% said most of the time and 11% said always. When asked if teachers modify their language use to assist ELLs 7% said never, 21% said sometimes, 21% about half of the time, 43% most of the time and 7% said always.

Teachers responding to whether or not they modify the classroom learning environment (e.g. bilingual dictionary, classroom bilingual books, bilingual labelling, resources) to assist ELLs, about 25% said never, 25% indicated sometimes, 21% said about half the time, 21% said most of the time and 21% said always. Additionally, in terms of modification of assessments (e.g. providing a word bank, dictionary, extra time) to assist ELLs, about 25% said never, 29% said sometimes, 7% said about half of the time, 29% said most of the time and 11% said always.

#### 4.1.3 Open-ended questions

The majority of the teachers expressed interest in receiving further instruction regarding teaching diverse language students. They expressed an interest in learning various teaching strategies that could help them in addressing barriers to linguistic diversity. Some suggestions were curriculum differentiation, inclusive teaching strategies and communication skills. The teachers further expressed an interest in additional learning to improve their linguistic proficiency. Some expressed a desire to learn how to greet in commonly spoken home languages, while others expressed a desire to learn an entirely new language that was relevant to their students. The teacher further indicated that additional learning support materials and resources would go a long way to address linguistic diversity in their classes. Some of the suggestions that were given were textbooks, charts, posters, dictionaries and language teaching props.

The majority of the teachers said that they used various forms of visual aids such as pictures, flashcards, word-picture matching and audio-visual materials to modify their classroom learning environment to assist English Language Students. About 25% of the teachers used bilingual resources or methods of instruction. About 11% of these teachers used oral bilingual methods, while 14% used resources such as bilingual charts, bilingual picture cards and multilingual dictionaries. Some of the teachers said that they gave the students extra activities in the language of instruction to help them improve their language development. While some, only two teachers said that they used modelling and demonstrations of the main concepts and content. They further explained that they used peer assistance to help students who are not fluent in the language of instruction.

The most commonly used assessment modification (26%) was given extra time to ELLs. About 10% of the assessment modification strategies used, accommodated ELLs by giving additional explanation of the instructions. Some of the teachers specified that this was done through one-on-one interaction. Other forms of adaptation of assessments included extended explanation strategies they used to make it easier for the students to understand the assessment. Some examples were providing word banks, incorporating visual material, allowing dictionary use and hinting at the important words by putting them in bold or italics. They were those who used a form of peer assistance, often, peer teaching or shared reading. A further 17%, incorporated group work as a means of supporting ELLs. About 11% of the other strategies used to accommodate ELLs involved additional homework resources in the form of videos, activities and/or additional reading. About 6% of the oral language strategies used involved code-switching done by the teacher, while 14% encouraged the increased use of the language of instruction in the form of debates and discussions in the classroom to enhance the students' competence.

## **4.2 Semi-structured interview**

There were three themes generated from the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews.

- Effective strategies for supporting and accommodating linguistically diverse students
- Ineffective strategies for accommodating linguistically diverse students
- Teacher training and professional development

*Theme 1: Effective strategies for supporting and accommodating linguistically diverse students.*

Theme 1 refers to the teachers' conceptualisation of effective strategies for accommodating linguistically diverse students. Within this theme, four sub-themes emerged. This include (1) language use, (2) collaborative learning, (3) visual assistance and (4) verbal support.

### *4.2.1 Language use*

Under the sub-theme language use is code-switching. From the participants' responses, it was evident that the most common language use strategy was code-switching. The teachers referred to code-switching as translation during the interviews, because they were unaware of the formal name of the strategy.

### *4.2.2 Collaborative learning*

From the participants' responses, it was evident that the most common forms of collaborative learning are group work, peer tutorial and peer support. Group work refers to peer group activities, which have been highlighted by the teachers as a strategy to assist linguistically diverse students. Peer support refers to students interpreting the content as well as explaining activities to one another.

### *4.2.3 Visual assistance*

From the responses provided by the participants, it was evident that the use of colours, posters, illustrations, pictures and the use of concrete objects were the most common strategies used. The use of colours refers to activities that are based on matching colours of different languages. The use of posters refers to the activity of making posters to help students make a visual link between different languages. The use of pictures refers to the use of the word-picture method, and the use of concrete objects refers to using 3D objects.

### *4.2.4 Verbal support*

The most common participant responses were demonstrations using students, the use of poems, dialogues, etc. and explaining words in context. Demonstrations using students refer to the teachers using the students to physically demonstrate the content. The use of poems, dialogues, etc. is used to increase the students' oral language

abilities. Explaining words in context helps the students to expand their vocabulary and understand better.

*Theme 2: Ineffective strategies for accommodating linguistically diverse students.*

Ineffective strategies for accommodating linguistically diverse students refer to what the participants found to be ineffective strategies for accommodating linguistically diverse students. These ineffective strategies according to the participants include (1) group work, (2) code-switching and (3) using only one language of instruction.

Group work was found to be ineffective by the interviewees, because the message that the teachers were trying to convey was understood incorrectly by the students. Code-switching was found to be ineffective by the participants due to the fact of the teachers and the students limited grasp of the languages being used. This refers to the teacher or the students being fluent in only one of the languages being used during the process of code-switching. Using only one language of instruction was found to be ineffective as it does not accommodate linguistically diverse students who do not understand the language of instruction.

*Theme 3: Teacher training and professional development.*

Teacher training and professional development refers to the training which teachers have either been provided with or personally sought out after their studies. A common response by the participants showed that most schools had not provided any additional training for their staff. However, the teachers did not personally seek out any additional training. This training is referred to as continuous professional development. A sub-theme that emerged from the participants' responses referred to subject-specific workshops, which is based on providing activities and strategies to teachers to be used in subject-specific classrooms. The participants' responses reflected the important role that staff play in each other's teaching. For many of the participants, they had not been provided with additional training and therefore, they have sought out assistance from their fellow colleagues.

## 5. Discussion

The primary research question was, "What are teachers' instructional strategies for facilitating learning in linguistically diverse primary classes?" The demographic information provided illustrates that even among teachers, linguistic diversity is prevalent and within the individual classroom, it is not just the South African official languages that are represented. The cosmopolitan nature of the capital city means that other languages are also represented thus increasing the extent of diversity in primary schools.

The vast majority of the participants are aware of the need for the education system to be cognizant of the extent of diversity and for teacher preparedness for teaching in multilingual linguistically diverse classes to be intentional and for teachers to be better equipped for the task. The participants suggest that training in new techniques, specialized teaching in the home languages and support ought to be accorded to them to ensure that the effectiveness of their jobs can be guaranteed. In their bid to support the students in their classrooms, the participants disclosed that they modify their instruction, assessment and environments for better results. The strategies teachers highlighted as being effective for facilitating learning within linguistically diverse classroom includes incorporating the knowledge of culture within the classroom, collaborative learning, code-switching, using more than one language of instruction,

visual assistance, verbal support, modifying assessments, classroom learning environments and instructions, bilingual resources and peer support. It is interesting that the participating teachers did not mention the use of translanguaging. This could be due to a lack of awareness of this term and possible association with secondary and tertiary education.

In terms of support for assessment, the teachers stated that effective methods included providing extra time, allowing dictionary use, incorporating word banks and visual materials to make the content in the assessment easier to understand, as well as providing hints such as putting keywords in bold or italics. There were participants who expressed some frustration on the long-term effect of the use of some of the support strategies they use in their classes. An example of this is code-switching and code-mixing. These strategies are effective instructional strategies but could constitute challenges during assessments that are solely completed in the language of instruction.

The teachers expressed a desire for more directed and relevant professional developments that are contextually relevant to them and their students. It appeared that they do not always have the luxury of choosing which training or professional development programmes to attend and while the programmes contain important information, the extent of linguistic diversity of the teachers' contexts is not considered resulting in their inability to implement and sustain the new knowledge.

## **6. Conclusion**

Teachers are aware of their diverse contexts and the importance of supporting and accommodating students with learning difficulties. However, there is also a call for further assistance and for further up-skilling. A study of this nature should be conducted on a larger scale and the strategies identified structured into professional development materials for teaching in linguistically diverse contexts. It is important that students who have to learn in multilingual and linguistically diverse classes have the support they require to thrive in these environments particularly when the language instruction has not yet been mastered.


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