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## HURDLES TO LANGUAGE GROWTH: STIMULATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH READING IN A SOUTH AFRICAN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

Early after birth, children begin to learn how to interact with their peers. They advance from a rudimentary understanding of what others are doing to communicate and interact with others in a reciprocal manner that entails both cooperation and conflict. Children begin to build their first friendships and unique peer interactions by the age of three years. According to the theory that the interactions between children and their caregivers establish a foundation for language development, language is an essential social tool. This study explores the impact of reading instruction on language development in a rural primary school in the Eastern Cape. Using a qualitative approach, we examined how structured reading programs stimulate language acquisition among young learners. The study will use 20 practitioners from the rural outskirts of South Africa. This research highlights the challenges and successes experienced by educators and students in this context, emphasizing the role of reading in enhancing vocabulary, comprehension, and overall communication skills. These findings suggest that targeted reading interventions can significantly improve language proficiency and offer valuable insight into educational strategies in similar rural settings. Further findings suggest that while reading instruction contributes positively to language development, significant barriers related to resources, teacher training, and home language diversity complicate its effectiveness. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving literacy education in rural contexts, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive materials, and continuous teacher professional development.

**Keywords:** Simulation, Language acquisition, Learning, Rural, Reading

### INTRODUCTION

The introduction of language development through reading instruction in rural South African primary schools presents a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. In the context of a rural primary school in the Eastern Cape, this study explores how structured reading programmes stimulate language acquisition among young learners, highlighting both the successes and hurdles encountered in this process. Language acquisition is a fundamental aspect of child development, with early interactions forming the basis for future communication skills. In rural South African settings, where resources are often limited and linguistic diversity is high, the process of language development through reading faces unique challenges. This research uses a

qualitative approach to examine the impact of reading instruction on language development. It focusses on the experiences of educators and students, emphasizing how reading interventions contribute to enhancing vocabulary, comprehension, and general communication skills in this specific context. The study reveals a complex landscape in which reading instruction positively influences language development but faces significant barriers. These include resource limitations, inadequate teacher training, and the challenges posed by the diversity of the home language. The traditional teacher-centred approach, the scarcity of reading materials, and the lack of a print-rich environment are identified as key obstacles to effective language stimulation through reading.

Despite these challenges, the research highlights innovative efforts by some teachers to integrate cultural elements and oral language activities into their lessons. These initiatives, while limited by various constraints, demonstrate the potential for culturally responsive teaching methods to enhance language acquisition through reading. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the barriers to language growth in rural South African primary schools, offering insight into the complexities of implementing effective reading instruction in resource-constrained environments. The findings of this study have significant implications for educational strategies in similar rural settings, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that address both the technical aspects of reading instruction and the broader sociolinguistic context of rural education.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review section provides a comprehensive overview of existing research on language development through reading instruction in rural South African primary schools. This section critically examines the current body of knowledge, highlighting key findings, methodologies, and gaps in understanding. Previous studies have emphasized the crucial role of early reading experiences in language acquisition, particularly in multilingual contexts (Seidenberg, & MacDonald, 2018; Smith et al., 2025). These studies have underscored the importance of fostering a strong foundation in reading skills during the formative years of primary education, as it significantly impacts overall language proficiency and academic performance.

Research conducted in rural South African settings has revealed the challenges faced by educators in implementing effective reading programs, including resource constraints, linguistic diversity, and inadequate teacher training (Li, 2018; Haile & Mendisu, 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where schools often lack access to modern educational resources and face difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers. The linguistic diversity prevalent in South African classrooms further complicates the implementation of reading programs, as educators must navigate multiple languages and dialects within a single learning environment. Several studies have explored the impact of structured reading interventions on language development in rural primary schools. For instance, longitudinal studies by Makonko (2022) and Mbatha (2024) demonstrated significant improvements in

vocabulary and comprehension skills among learners exposed to daily reading sessions. This research highlighted the potential benefits of consistent, structured reading activities in enhancing language acquisition. However, the study also noted the limitations imposed by the scarcity of age-appropriate reading materials in indigenous languages. This scarcity presents a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of reading programs and underscores the need for increased investment in the development and distribution of culturally relevant reading materials. This literature highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching methods in enhancing language acquisition through reading. Research by Mengwai (2024) and Chang (2025) found that incorporating local stories and oral traditions into reading instruction increased student engagement and improved overall language proficiency. This finding emphasizes the value of contextualizing reading materials and instructional approaches to reflect the cultural backgrounds and experiences of learners. By doing so, educators can create more meaningful and relatable learning experiences that foster a deeper connection between students and the language they are acquiring. Furthermore, studies have explored the role of technology in supporting reading instruction and language development in rural settings (Chang, 2025). While access to digital resources remains limited in many rural areas, research has shown promising results in the use of mobile devices and offline digital libraries to supplement traditional reading materials (Arulebe & Jere, 2022; Matiyenga & Khoalenyane, 2025). These technological interventions offer potential solutions to the scarcity of physical books and provide opportunities for interactive and personalized learning experiences.

The impact of parental involvement and community support on language development through reading has also been a focus of recent research. Studies have demonstrated that children whose parents actively participate in their reading activities at home show greater improvements in language skills compared to those without such support (Zulu et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of extending reading instruction beyond the classroom and engaging families and communities in the language development process. While existing research provides valuable insights into the challenges and potential strategies for language development through reading in rural South African schools, there remains a need for more in-depth studies examining the long-term effects of reading interventions on language acquisition (Omidire, 2020; Buthelezi, Chatikobo & Dalvit, 2021; Ameen & Najeeb, 2023). Additionally, further research is required to explore innovative approaches to overcoming resource constraints and linguistic barriers in rural educational settings. Future studies could also investigate the potential of cross-linguistic transfer in multilingual reading instruction and its impact on overall language proficiency.

In conclusion, the literature review reveals a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities in promoting language development through reading instruction in rural South African primary schools. While significant progress has been made in understanding the factors that influence successful reading programs, there is still much to be explored in terms of developing sustainable, culturally appropriate, and effective strategies for enhancing language acquisition through reading in these diverse and resource-constrained environments. The analysis of classroom observations revealed that reading instruction in the school studied predominantly followed a traditional teacher-centered approach. Teachers emphasized phonics and sight word recognition

as core components of their literacy instruction, with limited opportunities for students to engage in independent reading or creative language use. Reading materials, including textbooks and storybooks, were scarce, and most students had little access to books outside school hours. The absence of a print-rich environment in the classroom, such as posters, charts, or reading corners, further hinders opportunities for incidental language learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2020; Khosa, 2025). Despite these challenges, some teachers have attempted to integrate storytelling and oral language activities into their lessons to stimulate language development. For example, one teacher used local folktales as the basis for reading comprehension exercises, which allowed students to connect their reading to their cultural heritage. However, these efforts were limited by time constraints and pressure to meet curriculum demands.

Open Educational Resources (OER) offer teachers free access to high-quality educational materials with open licenses, allowing them to prepare, enhance, or supplement their teaching practice (Admiraal, 2021). These resources can be adapted to fit specific needs, though fewer teachers create or publish OER themselves. Digital instructional strategies and tactics are also widely used, with technology often viewed as central or essential to instruction (Yarbro et al., 2016). Six major digital instructional strategies and 16 related tactics were identified, which teachers used to varying degrees throughout the year. Interestingly, while technology integration presents new opportunities for teaching and learning, there are significant barriers to its use in higher education classrooms (Brill & Galloway, 2006). These barriers include finding relevant, up-to-date, and high-quality resources, as well as time constraints and institutional support issues (Admiraal, 2021). Additionally, for students with disabilities, geoscience departments have developed accessible field-based instructional strategies, categorized into modifications, accommodations, and options for accessible instructional design (Giacovazzi, Moonsamy, & Mophosho, 2021). In conclusion, accessible classroom practices and resources range from traditional approaches to technology-enhanced strategies. The adoption of these practices is influenced by various factors, including teachers' beliefs, professional development, and institutional support. While there are challenges in implementing new practices, research suggests that teachers are increasingly adapting their methods to incorporate diverse resources and strategies to meet the needs of 21st-century learners (Haug & Mork, 2021).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Language growth in rural primary schools is influenced by various factors, including exposure to dominant languages, limited literacy resources, and the sociocultural environment. The challenges faced by learners in developing their linguistic skills can be understood through Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory (1979) and Fishman's Language Shift Theory (1991). These theories provide insight into the barriers to language growth and the difficulties rural learners face in acquiring and maintaining their native languages while learning to read. Both Cummins and Fishman provide frameworks to understand why rural learners struggle with language growth and literacy development. Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory explains how limited exposure to L1 weakens literacy skills in both L1 and L2, making reading comprehension difficult. Fishman's Language Shift Theory highlights how the dominance of a

second language in education contributes to the loss of the first language, further hindering literacy development. Together, these theories reveal that language growth in rural primary schools is not just about reading instruction, but also about ensuring that learners develop strong foundational literacy in their native language before transitioning to a second language. Without this foundation, students remain caught between two languages, unable to fully master either.

## **Problem Statement**

Language growth is a crucial aspect of early childhood education, yet many children in rural primary schools face significant challenges in developing strong language and literacy skills. The process of learning to read is often hindered by limited exposure to reading materials, lack of parental involvement, and inadequate instructional support. In many rural communities, children grow up in multilingual environments, but their native languages are not adequately reinforced in formal education. As a result, they struggle with vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and overall language proficiency.

One of the key challenges is that children are often required to learn in a language that is not their home language, which can create barriers to literacy acquisition. Many learners lack foundational reading skills in their first language, making it difficult for them to grasp concepts in the second language. This mismatch between home language and school language slows down their reading progress, limits their ability to express themselves, and affects their academic performance. Additionally, a lack of access to appropriate learning resources such as books in children's native languages, well-equipped libraries, and reading programs further contributes to slow language development. Teachers in rural schools may also face challenges in implementing effective literacy strategies, especially when working with children who have limited exposure to reading at home. The absence of structured support systems for early language development deepens the gap between learners in rural and urban settings, leaving many children at risk of poor literacy outcomes.

This study seeks to explore the barriers to language growth in rural primary schools by examining the challenges children face in learning to read, the impact of limited exposure to reading materials, and the effectiveness of current instructional practices. Addressing these hurdles is essential for enhancing language development, improving literacy rates, and ensuring that children in rural communities receive equitable learning opportunities.

## **METHODOLOGY SECTION**

This study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the impact of structured reading interventions on language development in rural South African primary schools. The research design uses qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of reading programs and their influence on language acquisition.

## **Participants:**

The study involves 30 educators from 10 rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Participants are selected to focus on the critical period of language development. The schools are chosen based on their geographical location, socioeconomic status, and linguistic diversity to ensure a representative sample of rural educational settings.

## **Data Collection:**

### **Qualitative data:**

Semi-structured interviews with teachers. Reflective journals are maintained by participating teachers.

## **Data Analysis:**

### **Qualitative data analysis:**

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and content analysis of teacher reflective journals.

## **Ethical Considerations:**

Informed consent obtained from the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants maintained throughout the study. Approval sought from relevant educational authorities and school governing bodies. Ethical clearance obtained from the university's research ethics committee

## **Limitations:**

The study's duration of six months may limit the observation of long-term effects. The sample size and geographical focus on the Eastern Cape may affect generalizability. Potential Hawthorne effect due to participants' awareness of being studied. By employing this qualitative methods approach, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of structured reading interventions in promoting language development in rural South African primary schools. The use of qualitative data will offer insights into the outcomes and the contextual factors influencing the success of reading programs in these settings.

## **RESULTS/FINDINGS**

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the challenges and strategies associated with language development in early rural childhood education. Various factors influence the way children acquire, maintain, and develop language skills, particularly in multilingual and socio-economically disadvantaged settings. The results highlight key issues related to language maintenance and shift, vocabulary development, socio-economic factors, reading and language development, and instructional strategies used to enhance learning outcomes. In multilingual families, children often experience a decline in their original language due to limited exposure and practice, leading to a gradual language shift. This phenomenon affects their ability to properly learn and use their native language, which can result in language endangerment over time. Additionally, vocabulary development is significantly impacted by parental involvement, with limited engagement contributing to smaller vocabulary sizes and difficulty in expressing

thoughts and emotions. The study also underscores the impact of socio-economic factors on language learning. Poverty in rural areas affects access to educational resources, contributing to lower literacy rates and hindering overall language development. Furthermore, limited access to reading materials and a lack of structured exposure to language-rich environments slow down children's progress in acquiring linguistic skills. Many learners also face psychological barriers, such as anxiety and low self-confidence, which further impede their ability to develop and use language effectively.

To address these challenges, educators employ various instructional strategies aimed at fostering language growth. Play-based and interactive learning techniques enhance social and cognitive development, while breaking reading content into smaller sections helps learners process information more efficiently. Regular exposure to diverse language sources, the use of language learning applications, and strategies to reduce anxiety and build confidence contribute to a more supportive learning environment. The following sections explore these findings in detail, illustrating the ways in which language maintenance, vocabulary growth, socio-economic conditions, reading practices, and instructional strategies shape early childhood education in rural settings.

## 1. Language Maintenance and Shift:

Language maintenance and shift are critical issues in multilingual communities, particularly in rural areas where children are often exposed to dominant languages at the expense of their native tongues. According to Fishman (1991), Aitchison (2001), & Idaryani & Fidyati (2022), language shift occurs when a community gradually abandons its native language in favor of a more widely spoken one, often due to socio-cultural and economic factors. He emphasizes that intergenerational transmission is key to language maintenance, more especially if children do not actively use their heritage language at home and in social settings, it becomes vulnerable to decline.

Similarly, Khosa (2025) highlight that children in multilingual families often face a decline in their original language proficiency due to reduced exposure and practice, especially if the dominant language in their environment is different. This is particularly evident in rural areas where the dominant language of education and social interaction often overshadows the home language. One participant in this study noted:

*" Children raised in multilingual families often experience a weakening of their original language due to lack of practice. At home, they speak one language, but at school, they are required to use a different one. Over time, they find themselves struggling to say some words in their own language."*

This illustrates how institutional language policies and societal norms contribute to the gradual erosion of native languages. Garcia and Wei (2014) and Ogwudile (2024) argue that young learners in multilingual settings struggle to acquire their heritage language because they are not

frequently exposed to its phonetic and grammatical structures. This aligns with the finding as one teacher expressed:

*" The new generation finds it challenging to properly learn their languages as they are not accustomed to the usage and sound of certain words. They sometimes mix words from different languages because they are not sure how to say them correctly in their mother tongue."*

This reflects what Muchemi (2024) refers to as "linguistic interdependence," where proficiency in one language supports or interferes with learning another, depending on exposure and reinforcement. Cummins (1979) argues that proficiency in one language supports the learning of another and that a strong foundation in the first language (L1) enhances overall cognitive and linguistic development. However, in rural primary schools, many learners struggle with literacy because their native language is underdeveloped, leading to difficulties in both first and second language acquisition.

Moreover, Cenoz and Gorter (2024) warns that lesser-used languages face the risk of extinction if they are not actively spoken and passed down through generations. This study supports his assertion, as participants frequently mentioned that their original language is fading, making it seem as though it is vanishing. One respondent noted:

*" The lesser-used language is gradually lost, and learners adapt to another language that is not their own, making their original language endangered."*

This sentiment aligns with the concept of "language endangerment" discussed by Ogwudile (2024), who argue that minority languages diminish when younger generations fail to engage with them actively. This aligns with Cummins' view that a weak foundation in L1 results in language processing difficulties, making it harder for learners to grasp new vocabulary, comprehend texts, and express ideas in both L1 and L2.

Furthermore, Cummins' (1979) threshold hypothesis states that a child must reach a certain level of proficiency in their first language before they can effectively acquire a second language. However, in rural primary schools, children are often forced to learn in an unfamiliar language (L2) before mastering their native tongue (L1). These findings reinforce the urgency of language preservation efforts in rural early childhood education. Without proactive measures such as bilingual education programs, parental reinforcement, and community-based language initiatives many indigenous and minority languages may continue to decline. The next section explores additional challenges related to vocabulary development in rural multilingual learners. Socio-economic conditions especially in rural communities have a significant influence not only on general language development but also on the maintenance of indigenous or home languages. The lack of educational resources and poor literacy environments resulting from poverty pose serious threats to learners' ability to acquire and retain both their home languages (L1) and English (L2). *The socio-economic settings of the schools in rural areas have become one of the biggest obstacles to language development.*

Fishman's Language Shift Theory (1991) explains that language maintenance depends heavily on intergenerational transmission and contextual usage, both of which are disrupted in impoverished settings. In rural schools where education systems prioritize dominant languages (e.g., English or Afrikaans) over local languages, learners are often forced to shift to these dominant languages due to institutional pressure and lack of support for their mother tongues.

In addition, poverty restricts access to books, print media, and cultural activities in home languages, which are essential for language reinforcement. Without these resources, indigenous languages are less likely to be read, written, or spoken in formal settings, accelerating language shift and loss (Alsubai, 2024). UNESCO (2010) has highlighted that under-resourced rural schools are less likely to implement mother-tongue-based multilingual education due to funding and material constraints. The lack of trained teachers fluent in local languages, inadequate reading materials, and insufficient support for bilingual education hinder language maintenance in these contexts.

*Poverty in rural communities directly affects educational resources and literacy rates.*

Furthermore, Alsubaie (2024) and Behera (2024) note that when learners are introduced to education in a language they barely understand, their literacy and language proficiency in both L1 and L2 suffer. In rural South African schools, learners frequently lack exposure to literacy-rich environments, leading to weak reading cultures in both home languages and English. Language is closely tied to cultural identity, and socio-economic barriers can contribute to the erosion of linguistic heritage. When schools and communities cannot afford to maintain cultural and linguistic programs due to poverty, learners internalize the idea that their home language is inferior or irrelevant. This affects their willingness to use, develop, or pass on their native language (Khosa, 2025).

The verbatim utterances rightly identify socio-economic conditions as a major barrier to language development. When extended to the domain of language maintenance, literature shows that poverty, lack of resources, and institutional neglect of indigenous languages lead to language shift, loss of linguistic diversity, and weakened cultural identity.

Efforts to promote multilingual education, invest in local language materials, and train bilingual teachers are vital to sustaining language maintenance in rural education systems.

## **2. Reading and Language Development:**

The development of strong language skills is deeply connected to access to reading materials, cognitive load management, and learners' emotional well-being. The following verbatim utterances reflect some of the critical barriers experienced in rural education contexts.

*Lack of exposure to reading materials and resources hinders the development of language skills.*

This utterance highlights a common issue in under-resourced rural schools where learners often have limited or no access to age-appropriate books, newspapers, or digital texts in either their home language or English. According to Behera, (2024) access to print materials is a key determinant of reading proficiency and vocabulary development. In rural contexts, the scarcity of resources directly correlates with weaker reading habits and slower acquisition of both first and additional languages. This reflects a common barrier in rural and under-resourced schools.

Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory (1979) provides a valuable framework for understanding this challenge. Cummins argues that proficiency in a learner's first language supports the acquisition of a second language. When learners have limited access to literacy resources in both their home language and English, they are deprived of the foundational language skills that could transfer across languages. Thus, the lack of reading materials not only stifles English development but also weakens the learners' cognitive-linguistic foundation as a whole.

Moreover, Ibrahim, Samila & Sulaiman (2022) stress that early exposure to print-rich environments helps children internalize language structures, word recognition, and reading fluency. Without such exposure, learners may lag behind in comprehension and vocabulary development, making it difficult for them to engage with grade-level content.

*Learners may experience memory processing overload when presented with a large amount of new knowledge, slowing down their language development and progress.*

This utterance points to cognitive overload, a concept from Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which states that working memory has a limited capacity, and excessive information especially in a second language can hinder learning. When learners are bombarded with unfamiliar vocabulary or complex texts without sufficient scaffolding, their processing systems become overwhelmed. In rural FAL settings, where learners may not have strong grounding in either their first or additional language, this overload becomes even more severe. According to Cummins, if learners' first language is not adequately developed due to systemic neglect or lack of use, it impairs their ability to acquire and process a second language like English. This suggests that instructional practices must be built from the learners' home language skills rather than bypass them.

Challenging reading tasks without adequate support (e.g., visuals, glossaries, or simplified texts) can result in poor retention, confusion, and reduced motivation. As highlighted by Department of Education (2020) language input needs to be at an optimal level of difficulty what Krashen (1982) calls comprehensible input to effectively support learning. If the cognitive demands are too high, learners disengage, and meaningful language acquisition is delayed.

*Anxiety and lack of self-confidence in language learning present another major obstacle for learners.*

This reflects the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982), which suggests that emotional variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation influence language acquisition. High levels of anxiety and low self-esteem act as a "filter" that prevents learners from fully engaging with the language input they receive. Language anxiety is a well-documented phenomenon. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) states that when learners experience high anxiety, low motivation, or low self-confidence, their ability to acquire a new language is significantly diminished. Here, Fishman's Language Shift Theory (1991) provides a socio-cultural layer to this issue. Fishman explains that language shift occurs when the dominant societal language (e.g., English) gradually replaces the home language due to external pressures. In the classroom, this can create an environment where learners feel ashamed of their native language or lack confidence in their bilingual identity. This internal conflict, in turn, raises affective filters, making it harder for learners to fully engage in English reading and communication.

Furthermore, the pressure to succeed in English, often at the expense of the home language, causes students to struggle with both languages. Fishman's theory emphasizes the importance of intergenerational language transmission and cultural validation factors that must be considered when designing reading and language development programs in multilingual settings. In many rural classrooms, where English is taught as a First Additional Language, students may feel intimidated by the language, fear making mistakes, or feel judged by peers. As noted by Maffea (2020) and Blyth (2023) language anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, reduced participation, and ultimately, lower achievement in reading and language tasks.

*"Learners find it difficult to convey important concepts or their own feelings due to limited vocabulary."*

This points directly to a restricted lexical range, which undermines learners' ability to participate in classroom discussions, comprehend texts, or express themselves clearly. A limited vocabulary restricts not just academic communication but also emotional and social expression.

The Linguistic Interdependence Theory suggests that vocabulary development in the first language contributes to stronger cognitive academic language proficiency in the second language. However, when the home language is undervalued or underdeveloped as seen in contexts influenced by language shift (Fishman, 1991) learners may fail to acquire a rich vocabulary in either language. This linguistic insecurity contributes to poor classroom performance and reduced learner confidence.

*"Lack of parental involvement is a significant obstacle to language development, leading to a small vocabulary."*

Parental involvement plays a key role in literacy development. According to Blyth (2023) children benefit from language-rich home environments where caregivers engage them in reading and storytelling. In many rural contexts, however, parents may have limited formal

education or English proficiency, which hinders their ability to support their children's language learning.

From Cummins' perspective, a lack of stimulation in the home language deprives children of the linguistic foundation necessary for successful second-language acquisition. Moreover, Fishman's theory suggests that when families stop using the home language at home due to perceived economic or academic disadvantages, the result is a loss of vocabulary and cultural identity—leading to limited expressive abilities in both languages.

Creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment is crucial to lower this affective filter. Teachers can incorporate positive reinforcement, peer collaboration, and low-stakes reading activities to help students build confidence and fluency over time. The utterances above reflect systemic barriers in rural learning environments that affect reading and language development. Limited access to resources, cognitive overload, and emotional factors such as anxiety and low confidence form a triad of challenges that require holistic interventions. Educational practitioners must address these through resource provisioning, differentiated instruction, and emotionally supportive pedagogies to foster effective language acquisition in rural learners. The challenges voiced by learners' lack of reading resources, cognitive overload, and emotional distress are deeply intertwined with broader linguistic and socio-cultural dynamics. The Linguistic Interdependence Theory reminds us that strengthening a child's home language supports their academic and linguistic success in English, while Language Shift Theory alerts us to the dangers of marginalizing home languages in favor of dominant ones.

For rural schools to foster true language development, educational stakeholders must ensure access to reading materials in both English and learners' home languages, scaffold instruction to reduce cognitive overload, and cultivate an emotionally supportive environment that values bilingualism and cultural identity.

### **3. Instructional Strategies:**

Language development in learners can often encounter various hurdles. However, effective instructional strategies can mitigate these challenges and foster a supportive learning environment. Interactive and play-based learning strategies are crucial for enhancing children's social and cognitive skills. These methods allow children to engage actively with their learning environment, fostering creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration. Research supports the effectiveness of play-based learning in early childhood settings, showing that it leads to deeper learning experiences and improved social-emotional development.

*Teachers use interactive and play-based learning strategies to improve learners' social and cognitive development.*

According to a study by Harvard Graduate School of Education, playful learning experiences that are joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, and socially interactive significantly enhance

learning outcomes. Additionally, Blyth (2023) found that play-based learning helps children develop self-regulation skills and problem-solving abilities. In rural contexts, where formal learning environments may be intimidating due to linguistic and socio-economic barriers, interactive methods can lower affective filters. However, resource constraints (lack of educational toys, materials, or training in playful pedagogy) may limit the practical implementation of such strategies. Furthermore, in overcrowded classrooms, individual engagement becomes difficult, undermining the full potential of this method. Chunking content is a powerful strategy to enhance learning by breaking down complex information into smaller, digestible parts. This method reduces cognitive load and helps learners process and retain information more effectively.

*Dividing reading content into smaller and more manageable chunks can help learners increase their knowledge progressively without feeling overwhelmed.*

Research from UMass Amherst indicates that chunking content helps students learn more effectively by allowing them to focus on foundational concepts before progressing to more complex ones. Khosa (2025) also emphasizes that chunking improves retention and comprehension by organizing information into manageable units. In rural settings, where learners often study in their second or third language and have limited support outside school, chunking supports manageable learning. However, this requires careful curriculum planning and differentiated instruction, both of which may be compromised by large class sizes, limited teacher training, and rigid syllabi imposed by central education departments. Frequent reading and exposure to diverse language sources are essential for developing literacy skills. Using tools like flashcards and language learning applications can further enhance vocabulary and comprehension.

*Promoting frequent reading and exposure to a variety of language sources, as well as using flashcards or language learning applications, can be effective strategies.*

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends shared reading from infancy to promote language-rich interactions and cognitive development. Maffea (2020), Ibrahim et al (2022) and Blyth (2023) found that engaging children in literacy activities significantly boosts their language and literacy development. This strategy is pedagogically sound, supporting Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory, where exposure to language in meaningful contexts builds overall language proficiency. Yet, the practical hurdles in rural South Africa are significant: poor access to libraries, limited digital infrastructure, and often no electricity or internet. While mobile phones are increasingly common, the use of language learning applications still requires digital literacy and consistent connectivity, which cannot be assumed in under-resourced areas. Reducing anxiety and building self-confidence are critical for effective learning. Anxiety can hinder memory retrieval and cognitive processing, while self-confidence encourages academic risk-taking and persistence.

*Lowering anxiety and increasing self-confidence in the learning environment can help learners overcome psychological obstacles.*

Saracho & Evans (2021) highlight that high anxiety reduces available working memory, making it harder for students to recall information under pressure. This highlights the emotional and psychological dimension of language acquisition, especially for rural learners who may experience linguistic insecurity when switching from their home language to English. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering safe, affirming spaces, but they themselves may lack confidence in English, especially when it's not their first language. Professional development and psychosocial support are needed not just for learners, but for educators too, to break cycles of anxiety and underperformance. Strategies such as creating a safe, welcoming environment and breaking tasks into small, achievable steps can help lower anxiety and build confidence.

During the interviews, educators vividly illuminated a variety of formidable barriers that impede effective language stimulation via reading. Chief among these obstacles is the stark linguistic mismatch between English, the language of instruction, and the diverse home languages of students. This daunting discrepancy renders it challenging for students to fully comprehend new vocabulary and complex concepts. Furthermore, teachers passionately voiced their exasperation over the severe shortage of professional development opportunities in literacy education, candidly admitting that many have not received sufficient training on cutting-edge pedagogical strategies for teaching reading.

## CONCLUSION

While the strategies proposed by participants are pedagogically robust and grounded in sound educational theory, they are often aspirational in rural contexts where structural barriers such as poverty, lack of resources, underqualified teachers, and infrastructure deficits persist. Implementing these strategies requires systemic support, ongoing teacher training, and community involvement to transform them from ideal to reality. By integrating these instructional strategies, educators can effectively address hurdles to language growth. The adoption of play-based learning, the strategic presentation of material, varied language exposure, and the cultivation of a supportive classroom environment are all instrumental in fostering language development. Research supports these methods, demonstrating their potential to enhance learners' linguistic skills and overall learning experience. Educators are encouraged to continually refine their approaches based on these insights to better facilitate language growth in their students. These instructional strategies, supported by relevant research, underscore the importance of interactive learning, content chunking, frequent reading, and a supportive learning environment in enhancing educational outcomes.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the importance of reading instruction in stimulating language development, but also highlight the significant challenges faced by educators and

students in rural settings. Reading instruction in the studied school promoted some basic language skills, but these were constrained by insufficient resources, lack of teacher training, and linguistic challenges posed by teaching in English. In particular, the gap between learners' home language and the language of instruction seemed to limit their ability to fully engage with texts, reinforcing the need for bilingual approaches that incorporate learners' home languages into the curriculum (Mohangi, Krog, Stephens & Nel, 2016).

The results align with existing literature on the benefits of reading for language development. A study by Maffea (2020) emphasizes the importance of oral language for reading, highlighting that early reading interventions can have long-term positive effects on language skills Rehman (2019). In the context of rural education, these findings underscore the need for targeted reading programs that address language development challenges. Additionally, the study found that while teachers made efforts to integrate cultural relevance into their teaching, such efforts were often limited by time and resource constraints. This suggests that reading instruction in rural schools must not only address technical literacy skills but also embrace cultural and linguistic diversity to maximize language stimulation.

The development of language and literacy among learners in rural educational contexts is deeply influenced by a complex web of interrelated cognitive, emotional, socio-cultural, and environmental factors. The verbatim utterances collected from learners provide valuable insight into the lived experiences that hinder reading proficiency, language acquisition, and language maintenance. This section discusses these insights through the lens of established educational theories and supporting literature.

## 1. Reading and Language Development

Verbatim utterances such as *"Lack of exposure to reading materials and resources hinders the development of language skills"* and *"Learners find it difficult to convey important concepts or their own feelings due to limited vocabulary"* reflect the foundational role of accessible reading materials in language acquisition. Ibrahim, Samaila and Sulaiman (2022) assert that access to print-rich environments is directly correlated with vocabulary growth and reading fluency. Unfortunately, many rural schools lack libraries, digital devices, and other textual resources necessary to foster early literacy skills.

According to Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory (1979), development in a learner's first language (L1) supports cognitive and academic proficiency in a second language (L2). In the context of rural South African schools, where learners may not have access to L1 or L2 resources, this interdependence is disrupted, leading to delayed literacy and reduced linguistic transfer across languages.

Cognitive challenges are compounded when learners experience *"memory processing overload when presented with a large amount of new knowledge"*. Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory explains that learners have a finite working memory capacity, which can be

overwhelmed by unfamiliar vocabulary and complex texts—especially in a language they are not yet proficient in. Without scaffolding techniques such as simplified language, visual aids, and prior knowledge activation, language development slows considerably (Valladare, 2021).

Emotional and psychological barriers were also reflected in statements such as *"Anxiety and lack of self-confidence in language learning present another major obstacle for learners."* Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a useful framework, suggesting that negative emotional states act as a filter that blocks language input from being processed effectively. Rural learners, often exposed to English in formal settings only, may feel intimidated, afraid of making mistakes, or marginalized for speaking their home language. This anxiety not only inhibits their participation but also leads to long-term disengagement.

## 2. Socio-Economic Conditions and Language Development

The utterance *"The socio-economic settings of the schools in rural areas have become one of the biggest obstacles to language development"* reflects a broader structural inequality in education. Poverty in rural communities often results in schools without functioning libraries, qualified teachers, or digital resources—factors that are vital to both L1 and L2 development (Saracho & Evans, 2021; Khosa, 2025).

Research by Hart and Risley (1995) emphasizes that children from low-income households are exposed to significantly fewer words, conversations, and reading experiences than their middle-class peers—a phenomenon known as the “word gap.” This limited exposure negatively affects vocabulary development, comprehension, and academic achievement. As the Department of Education (2020) results show, learners in under-resourced South African schools consistently score below the international average for reading comprehension.

Socio-economic barriers also intersect with issues of language maintenance. Fishman's (1991) Language Shift Theory warns that dominant languages often replace minority or indigenous languages when the latter are not institutionally supported. In rural communities where home languages are not reflected in educational materials or valued in school culture, learners may feel pressure to abandon their mother tongue. This shift accelerates vocabulary loss in both languages and weakens learners' ability to express themselves evident in the utterance, *"Learners find it difficult to convey important concepts or their own feelings due to limited vocabulary."*

## 3. Parental Involvement and Home Language Use

The utterance *"Lack of parental involvement is a significant obstacle to language development, leading to a small vocabulary"* point to the role of the home environment in shaping language learning outcomes. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) emphasize that language-rich homes, where caregivers read, tell stories, and engage children in conversation, are critical for early literacy development. In rural contexts, however, many parents may be illiterate, lack proficiency in English, or prioritize survival over educational engagement due to economic hardship. Cummins

(1979) argues that without strong L1 support at home, learners struggle to develop the cognitive-linguistic foundation needed for effective L2 acquisition. When parental support is absent and schools fail to affirm learners' home languages, both language development and maintenance suffer.

Fishman (1991) extends this argument by warning that when families abandon their indigenous language due to socio-economic or educational pressures, the intergenerational transmission of language is interrupted. This not only leads to lexical impoverishment but also disconnects learners from their cultural identities, reducing their motivation and confidence in both L1 and L2 literacy activities.

#### **4. Language Maintenance, Identity, and Educational Policy**

The marginalization of home languages in rural schools has implications beyond academic performance—it affects learners' cultural identity and long-term linguistic resilience. As Duke (2000), Giacobazzi, Moonsamy & Mophosho (2021) and Ibrahim et al (2022) argue, the erosion of indigenous languages is often a result of systemic neglect and lack of institutional support. Without policies that promote multilingualism, provide L1 materials, and train bilingual teachers, language maintenance is unlikely to occur.

Ibrahim et al (2022) points out that early-exit models of bilingual education, where learners are rapidly transitioned into English, often leave them illiterate in both languages. For language development and maintenance to be effective, learners must be supported through sustained instruction in both their home language and English, reinforcing their identities and academic potential.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This discussion reveals that the challenges rural learners face in reading, language development, and language maintenance are multifaceted and deeply systemic. The lack of exposure to print materials, cognitive overload, emotional anxiety, socio-economic hardship, minimal parental involvement, and the devaluation of indigenous languages all converge to create a highly constrained linguistic environment.

The theoretical insights of Cummins and Fishman underscore the importance of interdependence between languages and the socio-cultural dimensions of language use and transmission. Addressing these barriers will require strategic, context-sensitive interventions—including multilingual educational policies, resource provision, teacher training, and community involvement that recognize and elevate the linguistic and cultural assets of rural learners.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study highlights the critical role of reading instruction in stimulating language development even in resource-constrained rural schools. However, the findings suggest that several key improvements are necessary to fully realize the potential of reading instruction.

### **Teacher Training:**

There is a pressing need for professional development programs that equip teachers with effective strategies to teach reading, particularly in linguistically diverse classrooms.

### **Bilingual Approaches:**

Schools should consider integrating learners' home languages into their reading instructions to reduce linguistic barriers and promote greater comprehension.

### **Resource Investment:**

More resources, including books in English and other local languages, should be made available to students. Schools should also create print-rich environments that encourage incidental language learning.

### **Community Involvement:**

Schools can benefit from engaging with local communities to create a culture of reading outside the classroom by providing access to books and encouraging parents' involvement in early literacy activities.

By addressing these challenges, it is possible to create an educational environment that fosters language development through reading, even in rural and under resourced settings.

This study demonstrated that reading instruction can play a crucial role in stimulating language development in rural primary schools. The positive outcomes observed at the Eastern Cape School suggest that similar interventions may be beneficial in other rural settings. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of reading programs on language proficiency and academic achievement.

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