

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 25, No. 5, pp. 711-733, May 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.5.31>
 Received Feb 17, 2026; Revised Apr 14, 2026; Accepted Apr 30, 2026

Student Teachers' Perceptions of Using the Mother Tongue for Instruction in the Foundation Phase in Rural Schools

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Abstract. The use of the mother tongue (MT) as a medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase remains a contentious issue in multilingual resource-constrained rural contexts. Despite South African language-in-education policies advocating for MT instruction in the early years, its practical implementation is inconsistent due to limited resources, insufficient teacher preparation, and societal preferences for English. Understanding student teachers' perceptions is critical, as they are future educators responsible for enacting MT-based pedagogies in rural classrooms. This study explores Foundation Phase student teachers' perceptions of using the mother tongue for instruction in rural learning environments. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Translanguaging Theory, MT is conceptualized as both a cultural and cognitive tool that facilitates learning, meaning making, and learner engagement. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with student teachers enrolled in a rural teacher education programme. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, revealed that participants valued MT instruction for enhancing comprehension, participation, learner confidence, and cultural connectedness. Nonetheless, they reported significant challenges, including a scarcity of MT teaching resources, limited exposure to MT-focused pedagogical training, inconsistent support during teaching practice, and community perceptions prioritizing English for socioeconomic advancement. These constraints influenced their confidence in implementing MT instruction effectively. The study concludes that while student teachers conceptually support MT-based teaching, systemic limitations hinder its practice. It recommends strengthening MT pedagogical preparatischools andacher education, improving the availability of MT resources in rural schools, and

Citation:
 Randima, L., & Shirindzi, L.S. (2026). Student Teachers' Perception of Using the Mother Tongue for Instruction in the Foundation Phase in Rural Schools. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 25(5), 711-733. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.5.31>

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promoting community awareness of the educational advantages of MT instruction.

Key Words: Mother Tongue Instruction; Foundation Phase; Student Teachers' Perceptions; Rural Schools; Multilingual Education

1. Introduction

Mother-tongue (MT) competence is central to effective teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase, where language underpins learners' cognitive development, early literacy, and numeracy acquisition. The language of learning and teaching (LoLT) directly shapes how learners access concepts, interact with learning materials, and participate in classroom activities. Research consistently demonstrates that instruction mediated through learners' home languages enhances comprehension, supports literacy development, and fosters learner confidence, particularly in the early years of schooling (Sudoh, 2025; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). In multilingual contexts, teachers thus function as critical linguistic and cognitive mediators.

In South Africa's linguistically diverse education system, the use of African languages as LoLT in the Foundation Phase is a key policy priority intended to promote equity and meaningful access to learning. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2020) underscores the need to strengthen African languages across teaching, learning, and scholarship. Despite this strong policy mandate, the classroom implementation of MT instruction remains uneven. Rural Foundation Phase schools continue to face persistent challenges, including limited MT teaching resources, insufficient pedagogical support, and social pressures that privilege English as the language of upward mobility.

While the educational benefits of MT instruction are well established, less is known about the role of student teachers in enacting MT-based pedagogies during teaching practice. Existing research has largely focused on learner outcomes or the perspectives of in-service teachers, resulting in limited empirical insight into how student teachers—especially those completing their final year of teacher education—understand and apply MT instruction in authentic classroom settings. This gap is particularly pronounced in rural practicum contexts, where linguistic diversity, constrained resources, and complex classroom realities place heightened demands on novice teachers.

Final-year student teachers occupy a pivotal position as future Foundation Phase educators and frontline implementers of language-in-education policy. Their perceptions of MT instruction, sense of preparedness, and practicum experiences are likely to shape how policy intentions are translated into classroom practice. However, it remains insufficiently understood how these students navigate MT instruction during rural teaching placements, how prepared they feel to teach through the mother tongue, and what contextual factors enable or constrain their pedagogical choices.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on final-year Foundation Phase student teachers placed in predominantly rural schools. It explores their perceptions of mother-tongue instruction, their preparedness to implement MT pedagogies, and the challenges and supports encountered during teaching practice. By foregrounding student teachers' lived practicum experiences, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the alignment between language policy, teacher education, and classroom realities in rural contexts.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are final-year student teachers' perceptions of mother-tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase?
2. How prepared do final-year student teachers feel to implement MT instruction during rural teaching practice?
3. What challenges and enabling factors influence student teachers' use of the mother tongue in rural Foundation Phase classrooms?

Addressing these questions offers critical insights for improving teacher education programmes, strengthening support for MT instruction in rural schools, and advancing equitable early learning outcomes in multilingual South African classrooms.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptualising Student Teachers' Perceptions of Using the Mother Tongue for Instruction in the Foundation Phase in Rural Schools

Student teachers' perceptions of using the mother tongue (MT) as a medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase are shaped by a complex interaction of personal beliefs, prior educational experiences, and professional preparedness. Perceptions can be understood as beliefs and attitudes that influence how student teachers interpret the pedagogical value, feasibility, and legitimacy of MT instruction in early learning contexts (Probyn, 2024). These perceptions are particularly influential in determining whether student teachers actively adopt MT-based pedagogies during teaching practice or default to dominant-language instruction.

Personal linguistic histories play a significant role in shaping perceptions. Student teachers who experienced MT instruction themselves, or who originate from linguistically homogeneous rural communities, often recognise the cognitive and affective benefits of MT use, including improved learner comprehension and participation (Malindi, Ndebele & Gobingca, 2023). In contrast, student teachers whose schooling emphasised English tend to associate it with academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility. This association frequently leads to hesitation or resistance toward using MT as the primary language of instruction, even when student teachers acknowledge its pedagogical value (Thuketana & Makgabo, 2022).

Institutional factors within teaching education programmes further influence student teachers' perceptions. Research demonstrates that programmes which explicitly address multilingualism and bilingual pedagogies contribute to

increased confidence and willingness to implement MT instruction (Olawale, Hendricks & Rusi, 2024). However, many programmes provide limited practical training in African-language literacy and subject-specific terminology, resulting in student teachers feeling ill-equipped to use MT effectively in classroom settings (Hendricks & Xeketwana, 2024). This lack of preparation often translates into inconsistent or superficial use of the mother tongue during teaching practice.

Contextual challenges in rural schools compound these concerns. Resource shortages, including limited availability of MT learning materials and underdeveloped print-rich environments, make sustained MT instruction difficult (Malindi et al., 2023). Additionally, strong community preferences for early English instruction place pressure on student teachers to prioritise English despite recognising the educational benefits of MT use (Thuketana & Makgabo, 2022). These factors collectively shape how student teachers perceive the practicality and desirability of MT instruction in rural Foundation Phase classrooms.

Recent research suggests that exposure to translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies can positively shift student teachers' perceptions. When student teachers encounter translanguaging as a structured pedagogical approach rather than ad hoc code-switching, they become more likely to view multilingual practices as legitimate and effective strategies (Hendricks & Xeketwana, 2024; McKinney 2024). Translanguaging allows learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, thereby enhancing conceptual understanding and classroom engagement (Probyn, 2024). Understanding student teachers' perceptions is therefore critical, as favourable and well-supported beliefs can enable meaningful MT implementation, whereas uncertainty may result in minimal or inconsistent use.

2.2 Policy Context and Language-in-Education Reform

South Africa's language-in-education policy framework strongly endorses the use of the mother tongue in the early years of schooling. Recent scholarship highlights that MT-based bilingual education (MTbBE) aligns with national goals of linguistic equity and social justice (Ngubane, 2025). Despite this policy support, the practical translation of policy into classroom practice remains uneven, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools.

Ngubane's (2025) systematic review indicates that while MTbBE pilots are framed positively within policy discourse, implementation frequently falters due to limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and weak institutional capacity. Greyvenstein (2024) similarly reports that many Foundation Phase teachers receive minimal guidance from school leadership on how to enact multilingual policies. In her Limpopo-based study, Heads of Department offered little practical support beyond policy compliance rhetoric.

Teachers' own interpretations of policy further complicate implementation. Khanyile and Awung (2023) found that many educators perceive language policy as legitimising MT instruction only in the earliest grades. This perception, coupled

with community resistance to MT instruction, limits meaningful policy enactment. These tensions also affect student teachers, who are trained under progressive policy frameworks but often enter schools where policy is inconsistently operationalised. Phindane (2023) notes that although student teachers generally support MT instruction in theory, they express concern about their preparedness to teach in African languages, highlighting the gap between policy aspirations and teacher education realities.

2.3 Pedagogical and Cognitive Benefits of Mother-Tongue Instruction

A substantial body of literature affirms the pedagogical and cognitive benefits of MT instruction in early childhood education. Ngubane (2025) emphasises that learners who begin schooling in their home language develop stronger conceptual understanding, as MT functions as a cognitive scaffold rather than an obstacle. This finding aligns with international multilingual education research that recognises MT as a foundation for academic meaning-making. Empirical classroom-based studies further illustrate these benefits. Maluleke (2023) demonstrates that in bilingual Foundation Phase classrooms, the strategic use of MT and translanguaging helps stabilise understanding when learners transition between languages. Teachers' use of MT to clarify vocabulary and reinforce concepts reduces confusion and supports learners with limited English proficiency.

Beyond cognitive gains, MT instruction enhances learners' affective engagement. According to Ngubane (2025), learners taught through MT display greater confidence, increased participation, and more meaningful classroom interaction. These outcomes are particularly important in the Foundation Phase, where early confidence influences long-term academic trajectories. Furthermore, MT use reduces cognitive load in foundational literacy and numeracy, enabling learners to internalise key concepts without the additional burden of decoding an unfamiliar language.

2.4 Translanguaging, Bilingual Pedagogies, and Classroom Practice

Translanguaging has become central to contemporary discussions on implementing MT instruction effectively in multilingual classrooms. Carrim and Nkomo's (2023) systematic review concludes that translanguaging enhances meaning-making, scaffolding, and conceptual depth by allowing learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires. This approach validates learners' linguistic identities and challenges rigid monolingual norms.

Empirical studies support the pedagogical value of translanguaging. Hendricks and Xeketwana (2024) found that Grade 9 teachers who integrated isiXhosa and English fluidly enabled learners to engage more effectively with complex content. In the Foundation Phase, Schoeman et al. (2025) observed that translanguaging improved learner participation and confidence, even when standardised academic gains were not immediately evident. However, the successful application of translanguaging depends on teacher training. Carrim and Nkomo (2023) caution that without structured professional development, teachers may resort to inconsistent or unplanned code-switching. This highlights the

importance of preparing student teachers to deliberately and pedagogically implement translanguaging.

2.5 Student Teachers' Attitudes, Self-Efficacy, and Professional Preparedness

Student teachers' attitudes toward MT instruction are closely linked to their sense of self-efficacy and professional readiness. Phindane (2023) found that while most pre-service Foundation Phase teachers hold positive attitudes toward MT use, many feel inadequately prepared to teach through African languages. Concerns include limited training, insufficient subject-specific vocabulary, and a lack of mentorship during practicum.

Low self-efficacy can inhibit the use of MT in classrooms. Khanyile and Awung (2023) note that both student teachers and in-service teachers often lack confidence in teaching complex concepts in African languages. Teacher education programmes that embed multilingual pedagogy explicitly are more likely to produce graduates who feel prepared and committed to MT instruction (Ngubane, 2025). Practicum experiences further shape perceptions. Greyvenstein (2024) reports that in multilingual classrooms, teachers often revert to dominant-language instruction due to pressure and lack of support. Such environments may undermine student teachers' confidence and reinforce conservative language practices.

2.6 Rural Schooling Contexts: Constraints, Ideologies, and Practical Realities

Rural schooling contexts present distinctive challenges that shape the implementation of MT instruction. Khanyile and Awung (2023) identify persistent shortages of MT learning materials, limited curriculum support, and weak institutional backing in rural schools. These constraints affect both inservice and student teachers' confidence in MT use. Societal language ideologies further complicate MT instruction. Maja's (2024) study in rural Limpopo shows that communities often perceive English as a pathway to economic mobility, placing pressure on teachers to prioritise English instruction. Student teachers entering such contexts may internalise these expectations, even when they value MT instruction.

Practicum placements in rural schools often expose student teachers to inconsistent or unsupported multilingual practices. Greyvenstein (2024) found that teachers frequently rely on ad hoc strategies rather than structured multilingual pedagogy. Phindane (2023) notes that student teachers desire to use MT but experience anxiety and uncertainty, particularly in resource-poor environments. These findings underscore the need for contextually responsive teacher education and sustained support for MT instruction in rural schools.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Sociocultural Theory and Translanguaging Theory, which together provide a complementary framework for examining student teachers' perceptions and practices related to the use of the mother tongue (MT) as a medium of instruction in rural Foundation Phase classrooms (Sikhwari, 2025). Both perspectives foreground language as a central mediator of learning, cognition, and social interaction, making them well-suited to exploring

multilingual teaching and learning in contextually complex settings (Mutekwe, 2018). Anchoring the study in these theories enables a nuanced understanding of how student teachers interpret MT instruction and negotiate its practical implementation during teaching practice (Omidire, 2025).

Sociocultural Theory, rooted in Vygotsky's work, posits that learning and development occur through socially mediated processes, with language functioning as a key cultural and cognitive tool (Sikhwari, 2025). Within the Foundation Phase, instruction delivered in a language learners are familiar with enhances interaction, scaffolding, and conceptual understanding, particularly in early literacy and numeracy development (Mutekwe, 2018). In this study, Sociocultural Theory informed the design of the semi-structured interviews by foregrounding questions about learner participation, interaction, and the mediating role of MT in learning. It also guided the classroom observation focus, particularly on instances of verbal scaffolding, teacher-learner interaction, and MT-mediated meaning-making. During analysis, the theory informed the coding and interpretation of themes related to mediation, participation, and the pedagogical value of MT instruction (Oosthuizen, 2021).

Translanguaging Theory complements this perspective by recognising that multilingual speakers draw on a single, integrated linguistic repertoire to construct meaning rather than operating within separate language systems (Hendricks & Xeketwana, 2024). Translanguaging reframes MT use as a dynamic pedagogical practice that supports comprehension and inclusion in multilingual classrooms. In this study, the theory informed interview questions exploring flexible language use and shaped the observation focus on code-switching and language blending during instruction. It further guided the interpretation of themes related to pedagogical flexibility and tensions between policy and classroom practice. Together, these theories provide a coherent lens for understanding how student teachers' perceptions and practices are socially and contextually shaped in rural multilingual classrooms (Mutekwe, 2018; Omidire, 2025).

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore final-year student teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of using the mother tongue (MT) as a medium of instruction in Foundation Phase classrooms within rural school contexts. A qualitative approach was appropriate as it enables in-depth engagement with participants' meanings, beliefs, and interpretations, allowing the researcher to capture rich, contextually grounded accounts of how MT instruction is understood and practised in multilingual rural settings. This approach facilitated exploration beyond surface-level observations, foregrounding the social and cultural dynamics shaping language choices in early childhood learning.

A phenomenological research design guided the study, aiming to understand how student teachers experience and make sense of MT instruction during teacher training and teaching practice placements (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2022).

Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of a phenomenon through participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations (Samuel et.al., 2022). This design was particularly suitable for examining how student teachers' linguistic backgrounds, practicum experiences, and classroom interactions shape their emerging professional identities and pedagogical orientations in multilingual rural contexts (Abrahams, Mc Auliffe & Sayed, 2022). The study was conducted at a public university in South Africa offering a Bachelor of Education degree specialising in Foundation Phase Teaching. Participants were 15 final-year student teachers who had completed, or were completing, compulsory teaching practice placements in rural public primary schools. Recruitment occurred through a programme-wide invitation circulated via departmental communication platforms, followed by voluntary consent.

Teaching practice placements were undertaken in six rural Foundation Phase schools, characterized by limited teaching resources, multilingual learner populations, and strong community expectations favoring English despite learners' African home languages. The participant group included student teachers whose home languages were Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi, with variation in age and gender. This linguistic and demographic diversity enabled the inclusion of multiple perspectives shaped by differentiated language biographies and schooling contexts (Sibanda, 2025; Moganedi, 2025).

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct and sustained experience of MT instruction during rural practicum placements, positioning them to offer detailed reflections on pedagogical practices, challenges, and preparedness. Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews and classroom observations. Fifteen interviews were conducted, each lasting 45–60 minutes, either face-to-face or online due to geographical constraints. Interview questions explored participants' perceptions of MT instruction, preparedness, challenges encountered, and contextual influences on language use.

In addition, eight classroom observations were conducted during Foundation Phase literacy and numeracy lessons. Observations focused on instructional language practices, teacher–learner interaction, and MT-mediated scaffolding strategies. Field notes were used to document observed practices and contextual features. The combination of interviews and observations enabled methodological triangulation, enhancing analytic depth and credibility. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, thick description, reflexive journaling, an audit trail, and triangulation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Ethical clearance was obtained, informed consent was secured, pseudonyms were used, and participants' rights and cultural sensitivities were respected throughout the study.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step process. The researcher first familiarised themselves with the data, then generated initial codes related to MT instruction. These codes were examined to identify patterns and developed into broader themes. Themes were reviewed,

refined, defined, and reported in alignment with the research questions. Both deductive coding, guided by the theoretical framework, and inductive coding, emerging from the data, were employed. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, detailed contextual descriptions, an audit trail, reflexive practice, and data triangulation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Ethical clearance was obtained, informed consent was secured, confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and participants' rights and cultural sensitivities were respected throughout the study.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Theme 1: Perceived Pedagogical Benefits of Mother-Tongue Instruction

Findings from the study revealed that student teachers consistently perceived mother-tongue (MT) instruction as a critical pedagogical tool for improving learners' conceptual understanding in both literacy and numeracy during the Foundation Phase. Participants emphasised that learners grasp classroom concepts more effectively when instruction is delivered in a familiar language, as this reduces the cognitive burden associated with translating meaning while attempting to learn new content.

Student teachers explained that when learners are not preoccupied with decoding the language of instruction, they are better able to concentrate on the lesson's conceptual demands. Classroom observations supported these perceptions, as learners appeared more attentive, responsive, and engaged during lessons conducted in their home language, particularly in rural contexts where exposure to English remains limited. These observations reinforce the view that MT instruction functions as a bridge between learners' home and school environments, enabling meaningful access to curricular knowledge. Such findings align with existing research indicating that MT instruction reduces cognitive load and enhances learner understanding and retention (Moganedi, 2025).

"Our children learn better when their first language is used because they understand the teaching more easily." (P6)

Participants further noted that MT instruction positively influenced learners' classroom participation and willingness to engage in discussion. Student teachers observed that learners were more confident asking questions, responding to teachers, and interacting with peers when lessons were conducted in a familiar language. Learners appeared less anxious about making mistakes and were more willing to express their ideas openly. This increase in participation fostered collaborative learning and peer support, particularly during group and pair activities. From a sociocultural perspective, these findings illustrate how language mediates social interaction and learning, supporting Vygotsky's view that knowledge construction occurs through dialogic engagement within communities of learners.

"Children speak freely when taught in their language, ask questions, and encourage collaborative interaction." (P4)

Another prominent benefit identified by participants was the strengthening of foundational literacy skills through MT instruction. Student teachers reported improved phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, early reading

comprehension, and writing skills when literacy lessons were delivered in learners' home languages. Observations during literacy sessions showed that learners demonstrated greater accuracy in decoding, more fluent oral reading, and increased enthusiasm for reading activities when MT materials were used. Participants further explained that culturally familiar reading materials enhanced learner motivation, as learners could relate stories and examples to their own lived experiences. These findings support research suggesting that literacy skills acquired in the first language provide a strong foundation for later acquisition of additional languages, including English (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025).

"Children can read and write better when using their home language." (P11)

The emotional and psychological benefits of MT instruction also emerged strongly in participant accounts. Student teachers reported noticeable changes in learners who had previously been withdrawn or hesitant during English-medium instruction. When lessons were conducted in the home language, these learners became more active participants, volunteered answers, and displayed increased confidence in attempting literacy and numeracy tasks. Participants attributed these changes to learners' improved understanding of instructions and greater emotional security. When language barriers were removed, learners could focus on learning activities rather than grappling with comprehension difficulties. These findings resonate with research highlighting the role of MT instruction in strengthening learner confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being in early education contexts (Moganedi, 2025).

"There was a significant change in children who were withdrawn when taught in English; when taught in their home language, they felt secure and spoke more." (P9)

Participants further argued that MT instruction enabled teachers to draw on learners' cultural knowledge and everyday experiences as pedagogical resources. Teaching in the home language made it easier to incorporate indigenous stories, proverbs, familiar examples, and culturally grounded contexts into lessons. Learners responded positively to instruction that reflected their cultural realities, demonstrating heightened interest and participation. Student teachers viewed this cultural alignment as reinforcing learners' sense of belonging within the classroom and affirming their linguistic and cultural identities. These perceptions align with culturally responsive and decolonial educational approaches that advocate the use of African languages to sustain cultural identity and challenge historically marginalizing schooling practices (Gobana, 2025).

"Teaching in our language gives us a chance to integrate our culture in school, making children value their heritage." (P13)

Overall, student teachers' reflections and classroom observations demonstrate that MT instruction offers multiple pedagogical benefits in Foundation Phase classrooms. By reducing linguistic barriers, MT instruction enhanced conceptual understanding, strengthened learner participation, supported literacy development, improved emotional confidence, and facilitated culturally responsive teaching practices. Participants consistently regarded instruction in learners' home languages as essential for creating inclusive and equitable learning

environments, particularly within rural multilingual schooling contexts where linguistic diversity is often coupled with limited educational resources.

In conclusion, Theme 1 illustrates that student teachers perceive mother-tongue instruction as fundamental to effective early literacy and numeracy development. The use of learners' home languages promotes deeper comprehension, active participation, emotional security, and cultural affirmation. These findings underscore the foundational role of the mother tongue in supporting equitable and meaningful learning experiences and reinforce the importance of sustaining MT instruction within multilingual education contexts.

4.2 Theme 2: Professional Preparedness and Pedagogical Confidence

The findings revealed that student teachers experienced varying levels of professional preparedness and pedagogical confidence in implementing mother-tongue (MT) instruction in Foundation Phase classrooms. While most participants acknowledged the theoretical importance and policy relevance of MT pedagogy, many expressed uncertainties about their ability to translate this knowledge into effective classroom practice. Student teachers reported that their teacher education programmes offered limited practical engagement with MT literacy methodologies, bilingual teaching strategies, and translanguaging frameworks.

As a result, participants often felt conceptually informed but practically underprepared to implement MT instruction with confidence. This disconnects between policy expectations and pedagogical preparation contributed to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, reflecting broader concerns in the literature that pre-service teachers frequently feel ill-equipped to enact multilingual pedagogies due to limited curricular emphasis in higher education programmes (Phindane, 2023).

“At university, they tell us MT is important, but in schools, the teachers teach in English, so we feel confused and unsure of what to follow.” (P2)

Participants further highlighted that their pedagogical confidence was weakened by inconsistent modelling of MT instruction during teaching practice placements. Many reported that mentor teachers seldom demonstrated structured MT-based teaching, often favouring English because it was perceived to hold higher academic value and institutional legitimacy. This inconsistency between university instruction and classroom practice created confusion about which pedagogical approaches were appropriate or professionally acceptable.

Student teachers described struggling to reconcile what they learned during coursework with what they observed and were expected to replicate in schools. Research similarly indicates that practicum environments play a decisive role in shaping teacher confidence, particularly when discrepancies exist between theoretical training and classroom realities (Greyvenstein, 2024). Consequently, student teachers found it difficult to consolidate coherent professional identities aligned with multilingual teaching principles.

Challenges related to linguistic and academic proficiency in the mother tongue also emerged as a salient concern. Participants expressed uncertainty about their command of subject-specific terminology in African languages, particularly in content areas such as mathematics, science, and life skills. Student teachers feared that inadequate terminology would compromise conceptual accuracy and clarity, thereby affecting learners' understanding. These concerns were particularly evident when teaching abstract concepts such as fractions, measurement, or problem-solving strategies. Such findings echo those of Khanyile and Awung (2023), who note that many teachers feel linguistically underprepared to teach specialised content in African languages due to underdeveloped terminology and a scarcity of instructional resources.

"I worry that I don't have the right words to explain concepts properly."
(P1)

"Explaining things like fractions is difficult because some terms do not have clear equivalents in the home language." (P14)

Participants also reported insufficient training in pedagogical tools and instructional strategies aligned with MT instruction. Several student teachers felt unprepared to design MT-aligned lesson plans, assessments, and culturally responsive teaching materials. Participants emphasised that their training largely lacked concrete guidance on how to use translanguaging strategies effectively or integrate local linguistic resources into structured teaching and assessment. Without explicit modelling or exemplars, student teachers struggled to operationalise multilingual approaches in ways that met curriculum requirements. Research supports this concern, noting that teachers require structured and explicit pedagogical training to implement MT instruction effectively without undermining conceptual progression during language transitions (Carrim & Nkomo, 2023).

"We were not given concrete materials or practical strategies on how to teach using the mother tongue." (P3)

Despite these challenges, some participants reported moderate levels of confidence, particularly those who had completed additional African language modules or were placed in schools where mentors actively modelled bilingual or translanguaging practices. These student teachers described gaining confidence through repeated opportunities to practise MT instruction, receive feedback, and reflect on their teaching experiences. Peer collaboration and supportive mentoring were identified as critical factors in strengthening pedagogical competence. These experiences align with research indicating that teacher confidence increases when multilingual pedagogies are explicitly taught and consistently reinforced across coursework and practicum experiences (Nkomo, 2023).

"My confidence improved when my mentor allowed me to use both languages and guided me during lessons." (P7)

However, anxiety intensified when student teachers were expected to apply MT methodologies independently without adequate mentorship or institutional support. Participants described frustration resulting from conflicting expectations between university training and school-based practices. This contradiction

reflects wider systemic challenges within rural multilingual schooling contexts, where English-dominant teaching cultures persist despite policy support for MT instruction (Probyn, 2024). In response to these pressures, student teachers often defaulted to English as a perceived safer and more institutionally sanctioned option, inadvertently perpetuating existing literacy inequalities.

In conclusion, Theme 2 demonstrates that professional preparedness and pedagogical confidence in MT instruction remain uneven among student teachers. Limited practical training, inconsistent mentoring during teaching practice, linguistic insecurity, and weak institutional alignment significantly constrain the effective implementation of MT pedagogy. Addressing these challenges requires targeted reforms in teacher education programmes, including strengthened multilingual pedagogical training, improved coherence between universities and practicum schools, and sustained mentorship structures. Enhancing professional preparedness is essential for equipping future Foundation Phase teachers with the confidence and competence needed to implement mother-tongue instruction effectively and sustainably.

4.3 Theme 3: Inconsistent Support During Teaching Practice

Findings from the study revealed that inconsistent support during teaching practice significantly affected student teachers' ability to implement mother-tongue (MT) instructional approaches with confidence and consistency. Participants reported that mentor teachers rarely demonstrated MT-based teaching practices, leaving student teachers uncertain about how to translate university coursework into meaningful classroom practice. The absence of modelling limited student teachers' opportunities to observe MT pedagogy in action, experiment with multilingual strategies, or receive guidance on navigating contextual challenges.

This lack of support created confusion regarding appropriate instructional practices and weakened student teachers' confidence in applying MT instruction autonomously. Research similarly indicates that mentor teachers often lack either training or willingness to model MT instruction, despite policy recommendations encouraging its use in the early grades (Mkhize, 2022; Sibanda, 2023). Without alignment between teacher education institutions and practicum schools, MT instruction remains fragmented and dependent on individual teacher preferences rather than systemic support structures.

"My mentor teacher never used the mother tongue, so even if I wanted to try it, I felt like I would be going against how things are done at that school." (P15)

Participants further reported that some mentor teachers actively discouraged MT instruction, arguing that curriculum demands and assessment requirements necessitated early immersion in English. Student teachers explained that because examinations and formal assessments are conducted in English, schools often prioritise English instruction earlier than policy recommends. As a result, MT instruction was viewed as impractical or time-consuming within an exam-driven system. These findings reflect broader national debates in which teachers feel constrained by assessment frameworks that privilege English at the expense of

African languages, despite strong policy support for MT instruction in the Foundation Phase. Consequently, student teachers began to internalise the belief that prioritising MT instruction might disadvantage learners in the long term, weakening their professional confidence and commitment to linguistically responsive pedagogy.

"My mentor said we don't have time to use MT because the exams are in English, so we must start preparing learners early." (P3)

Another key challenge highlighted by participants was the limited feedback from university supervisors on MT instructional strategies during teaching practice. Several student teachers indicated that supervision sessions focused predominantly on general pedagogical aspects such as lesson structure, classroom management, and time allocation, with little attention given to language choice, multilingual pedagogy, or the pedagogical use of MT. Participants interpreted this omission as an implicit message that MT instruction was of secondary importance.

Research supports this interpretation, noting that when assessment and supervision frameworks do not explicitly foreground linguistic inclusivity, pre-service teachers come to perceive MT instruction as optional rather than essential in early learning contexts (Banda, 2023). The absence of targeted supervisory feedback, therefore, contributed to uneven classroom practice and reduced student teachers' confidence in using learners' home languages as legitimate instructional tools.

"The supervisor just looked at my lesson plan and timing, not whether I used MT or how I used it." (P5)

Participants also expressed frustration that many teaching practice placements occurred in schools whose instructional cultures conflicted with the multilingual principles promoted at universities. Even in rural schools where most learners shared a common home language, English was frequently prioritised from the early grades. Student teachers reported feeling compelled to conform to dominant school practices to avoid professional tension or criticism, particularly given their status as temporary and relatively powerless members of the school community.

Research across Southern Africa similarly demonstrates that when school environments discourage MT instruction, pre-service teachers are more likely to assimilate into dominant English-medium practices rather than challenge established norms (Probyn, 2024). Such mismatches limit opportunities for authentic MT pedagogical experimentation and undermine the transformative aims of teacher education programmes.

"It is difficult to practice what we learn when the school culture is different; we end up following the school system to avoid conflict." (P8)

Participants further explained that the cumulative effect of inconsistent mentorship, discouraging school cultures, and limited supervisory guidance reduced their confidence in sustaining MT instruction once qualified. Many expressed anxieties about being the sole advocates of MT instruction in English-dominant schools, fearing professional isolation or resistance from

colleagues and leadership. Existing literature similarly indicates that newly qualified teachers are unlikely to implement MT instruction without sustained mentorship, supportive school policies, and strong institutional reinforcement (Probyn, 2024). Participants therefore emphasised the need for stronger collaboration between universities and practicum schools to ensure consistent support and the reinforcement of multilingual pedagogical values.

"I believe MT can help learners, but without support, it feels risky to be the only one using it." (P10)

In conclusion, Theme 3 demonstrates that inconsistent support during teaching practice significantly constrains student teachers' ability to implement MT instruction confidently and consistently. The absence of mentor modelling, discouragement from school cultures, limited supervisory feedback, and misaligned practicum environments collectively undermine multilingual pedagogical development. Addressing these challenges requires closer collaboration between teacher education institutions and schools to ensure coherent modelling, effective mentorship, and shared accountability for MT implementation. Consistent and structured support during teaching practice is essential for equipping future Foundation Phase teachers with the confidence, competence, and professional agency necessary to sustain mother-tongue instruction in multilingual classroom contexts.

4.4 Theme 4: Community Perceptions and Societal Pressures Toward English

Findings from the study revealed that community perceptions play a powerful role in shaping instructional language choices in rural schools, often overriding formal policies that promote mother-tongue (MT) instruction in the Foundation Phase. Student teachers consistently reported that many parents and community members associate English with economic success, employment opportunities, and upward social mobility.

As a result, English is viewed as the most valuable language for schooling, even in communities where African languages remain dominant in everyday communication. These perceptions exert strong pressure on schools and teachers to introduce English as the primary medium of instruction earlier than policy guidelines recommend, marginalising the sustained use of learners' home languages. Research similarly shows that parental aspirations for English-medium education continue to persist across many South African communities despite extensive evidence supporting MT instruction in the early grades (Mthombeni, 2024; Sibanda & Joubert, 2024).

"Parents think English is success; they believe if we teach in MT we are holding their children back." (P12)

Participants further described instances where parents explicitly questioned or resisted the use of MT instruction during teaching practice placements. Student teachers explained that some parents feared teaching through African languages would delay learners' English proficiency and negatively affect their future academic performance. These concerns reflect deeply entrenched language myths that equate early English exposure with educational excellence, despite research demonstrating that strong foundations in learners' home languages support

long-term academic achievement and more effective second-language acquisition. To avoid parental dissatisfaction or conflict, schools often prioritised English-medium instruction, even when MT would better support learners' comprehension and participation. Such decisions reinforced English dominance in classrooms and positioned MT instruction as risky or undesirable.

"A parent asked why I was teaching in Tshivenda because they want their child to be fluent in English by Grade 3." (P5)

Community attitudes toward language also significantly affected student teachers' professional confidence and identity. Several participants reported feeling discouraged when community members implicitly or explicitly associate MT instruction with inferior education or limited competence. Student teachers explained that using African languages in instruction sometimes led to perceptions that they were less knowledgeable, less professional, or inadequately trained.

Research indicates that such stigma surrounding African languages contributes to the internalisation of negative attitudes toward MT pedagogy among teachers themselves, resulting in the devaluation of linguistically responsive teaching approaches (McKinney, 2024). Consequently, MT instruction may be framed as a remedial or secondary strategy rather than recognised as a cognitively sound and culturally appropriate pedagogical practice.

"It felt like they thought I was not educated enough because I was using the mother tongue." (P6)

Participants further noted that community preferences for English were reinforced by broader social and institutional influences, including the media, religious institutions, and local leadership structures. Student teachers observed that public discourse often portrays English as the language of progress, intelligence, and modernity, while African languages are implicitly associated with backwardness or limited opportunity.

In some cases, religious leaders, school governing bodies, and community figures openly promoted English as the language of aspiration. Scholars argue that such societal messaging plays a central role in sustaining linguistic hierarchies and undermining MT instruction, even in contexts where policy supports multilingual education (De Klerk, 2025). Without deliberate intervention, these narratives continue to shape parental expectations and school practices.

"Even pastors and local leaders emphasise English, so parents see MT as backward." (P4)

Across the findings, community perceptions emerged as one of the most influential external factors shaping language practices in rural schools. Student teachers described feeling caught between the professional knowledge and pedagogical principles emphasised during their training and the expectations of the communities they serve. This tension often created professional discomfort and reduced student teachers' willingness to advocate for MT instruction, particularly during teaching practice when their professional status was temporary and vulnerable. The literature similarly indicates that MT instruction

becomes sustainable only when communities are actively involved in language awareness initiatives and in collaborative partnerships with schools (Probyn, 2024). Without such engagement, teachers are more likely to default to English to avoid criticism or conflict, thereby reproducing existing educational inequalities despite supportive language-in-education policies.

“Even if I want to use MT, I know parents will challenge me, so I might just follow what they want.” (P11)

In conclusion, Theme 4 demonstrates that community perceptions and societal pressures exert a decisive influence on instructional language practices in rural schools. Parental aspirations, the symbolic prestige associated with English, and dominant social narratives collectively contribute to resistance to MT instruction. Addressing these challenges requires sustained community engagement, language awareness campaigns, and partnerships that challenge entrenched language myths and promote understanding of the educational value of mother-tongue instruction. Without meaningful community support, student teachers may struggle to confidently implement MT pedagogy, limiting the effectiveness of multilingual education policies intended to promote equitable and inclusive early learning outcomes.

4.5 Theme 5: Confidence, Agency, and Professional Identity in Implementing MT Instruction

Findings from the study revealed that student teachers’ confidence played a central role in shaping their willingness and ability to implement mother-tongue (MT) instruction in Foundation Phase classrooms. Although most participants recognised the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural value of MT pedagogy, many felt insufficiently prepared to use it with confidence. Student teachers explained that limited exposure to MT-focused teaching strategies during their training reduced their sense of pedagogical competence and professional agency.

In particular, the lack of consistent opportunities to practise MT instruction during coursework and teaching practice meant that participants frequently doubted their ability to implement MT approaches effectively and independently. Research similarly indicates that pre-service teachers often lack self-efficacy in MT pedagogy as a result of inadequate preparation and inconsistent modelling during practicum experiences.

“I believe in MT, but I’m not confident enough to stand in front of a class and use it fully.” (P9)

Participants further emphasised that professional identity was a critical factor shaping their current and future instructional practices. Several student teachers expressed concern that using MT instruction could be perceived as professional inadequacy in school and community contexts that strongly value English proficiency. Participants noted that English was often associated with intelligence, competence, and academic success, while African languages were sometimes viewed as appropriate only for informal communication or remedial learning.

Research indicates that teacher identity is deeply influenced by dominant societal attitudes toward language, particularly in postcolonial contexts where English is

frequently positioned as a marker of modernity and professionalism (Msimanga & Moyo, 2022). As a result, some student teachers felt pressured to conform to the socially valued image of an English-speaking teacher, even when they recognised the pedagogical and developmental benefits of MT instruction. These pressures reduced their willingness to exercise professional agency in adopting multilingual pedagogies.

“Some teachers and even students think that MT is for those who cannot speak English well, so it affects how we see ourselves.” (P13)

Despite these constraints, a number of participants demonstrated strong commitment to MT instruction, viewing it as an ethical and pedagogical imperative rather than simply a policy requirement. These student teachers framed MT instruction as a means to promote educational equity, support learner comprehension, and affirm cultural identity in rural schooling contexts. Participants argued that teaching in learners’ home languages helps bridge learning gaps, particularly for learners who struggle to access content through English.

Research similarly positions MT pedagogy as a decolonial and inclusive approach that empowers marginalised learners and supports equitable access to education (Makalela, 2021). For these participants, professional confidence was rooted in values of social justice, community responsibility, and learner-centred teaching rather than conformity to dominant linguistic norms. Their willingness to challenge prevailing practices suggests the potential for transformative teaching, provided that adequate support structures are in place.

“If we don’t teach in MT, we are disadvantaging our own children because they cannot understand English in the early grades.” (P2)

Participants also acknowledged that their professional agency was constrained by broader systemic forces operating within the education system. Curriculum expectations, assessment policies, and directives from school leadership often prioritised English as the dominant medium of instruction, limiting opportunities for sustained MT use. Student teachers explained that even when they personally supported MT instruction, they felt compelled to prioritise English to ensure learners’ readiness for formal assessments. Research confirms that education systems frequently reproduce linguistic hierarchies by privileging English within curriculum standards and high-stakes assessment frameworks. These systemic pressures restricted student teachers’ sense of autonomy and intensified the tension between their pedagogical beliefs and professional expectations.

“Even if I want to use MT, the curriculum pushes English, and we will be judged on how we prepare learners for English assessments.” (P1)

When reflecting on their future roles as Foundation Phase educators, participants expressed ambivalence about their capacity to consistently implement MT instruction once fully qualified. While some felt motivated to advocate for MT pedagogy, others anticipated resistance, criticism, or insufficient institutional backing. Literature similarly emphasises that teacher agency is shaped through the interaction of personal beliefs, training experiences, school environments, policy frameworks, and societal expectations (Probyn, 2024). Participants stressed

that sustaining MT instruction cannot rest solely on individual teacher commitment but requires collective institutional support across teacher education, school leadership, assessment practices, and community engagement. Without such systemic coherence, MT instruction risks remain sporadic and dependent on individual teacher resilience rather than embedded within professional practice.

"We want to use MT, but unless the whole system supports it, we cannot do it alone." (P14)

In conclusion, Theme 5 illustrates that confidence, professional identity, and agency are decisive factors influencing student teachers' willingness to implement MT instruction. Although many participants value MT pedagogy and recognize its benefits, professional uncertainty, societal perceptions, and institutional pressures constrain its consistent enactment. Strengthening student teachers' confidence and agency requires comprehensive and coordinated support systems that align teacher education, school practices, assessment frameworks, and community attitudes. Without such systemic alignment, the implementation of MT instruction will continue to rely on individual teachers' commitment rather than sustained institutional endorsement of multilingual education practices.

5. Recommendation

The recommendations emerging from this study are organised according to key stakeholder groups and are further differentiated between short-term feasible actions and longer-term systemic reforms. This structure is intended to enhance the practical applicability and policy relevance of the findings.

5.1 Teacher Education Institutions

In the short term, teacher education programmes should strengthen pre-service preparation for mother-tongue (MT) instruction by integrating structured coursework on bilingual and multilingual pedagogies, translanguaging approaches, and MT literacy development. Practical components, including micro-teaching, lesson simulations, and supervised teaching practice, should explicitly foreground MT-based instruction to ensure that student teachers develop confidence and pedagogical competence before entering the profession (Makalela, 2021). Universities can further support this process by modelling MT instruction through exemplars, tutorials, and mentorship from experienced lecturers and mentor teachers.

In the longer term, MT pedagogy should be institutionalised within Foundation Phase teacher education curricula as a core professional competence rather than a supplementary topic. This may involve revising programme learning outcomes, strengthening practicum assessment criteria related to language use, and fostering sustained collaboration between universities and rural schools to ensure coherence between theory and classroom practice.

5.2 Practicum Schools and Mentor Teachers

In the short term, practicum schools should be supported to model consistent MT practices during teaching practice. Professional development workshops and mentoring sessions for in-service and mentor teachers can equip them with

strategies to support student teachers in implementing MT instruction and translanguaging practices effectively (Mkhize & Balfour, 2021; Probyn, 2024). In the longer term, systematic investment in mentor teacher development is required to align pre-service training with classroom realities. Recognising and incentivising mentor teachers who effectively support MT instruction may contribute to improving the quality and sustainability of teaching practice experiences in rural schools.

5.3 Education Departments

In the short term, education departments should prioritise the equitable provision of MT teaching and learning resources, including textbooks, storybooks, visual aids, and digital materials in learners' home languages. Curriculum-aligned teacher guides would further support both novice and experienced teachers in implementing MT instruction effectively, particularly in resource-constrained rural contexts (Sibanda, 2023). In the longer term, policy coherence and systemic support for MT instruction are essential. Education authorities should monitor MT implementation in rural schools, provide guidance on curriculum adaptation, and align assessment frameworks to recognise MT instruction as a legitimate and valued pedagogical practice rather than an optional or transitional approach.

5.4 Communities and Parents

In the short term, schools, teacher education institutions, and local education authorities should collaborate with parents and community leaders to raise awareness of the cognitive, academic, and cultural benefits of MT-based learning. This can be achieved through parent workshops, school meetings, and community forums. In the longer term, sustained community engagement initiatives are required to shift societal perceptions that prioritise English over MT instruction. Creating community-level support for MT use in early education can contribute to more enabling environments for linguistically responsive teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

This study examined final-year student teachers' perceptions and experiences of using the mother tongue (MT) as a medium of instruction in Foundation Phase classrooms within rural South African contexts. The findings demonstrate that student teachers largely endorse MT instruction on pedagogical, cognitive, and cultural grounds, recognising its value in enhancing learner comprehension, participation, confidence, and cultural identity. Framed through Sociocultural Theory and Translanguaging Theory, the study confirms the central role of language as a mediating tool for learning and meaning-making in multilingual early childhood classrooms.

Beyond reaffirming the benefits of MT instruction, the study makes a distinct contribution by foregrounding student teachers' practicum experiences as a critical yet under-examined site of policy enactment. It reveals a persistent tension between conceptual support for MT instruction and the practical realities of rural schooling, where limited resources, uneven mentoring, constrained pre-service preparation, and community preferences for English shape how MT pedagogies

are enacted. In doing so, the study extends existing scholarship by illuminating how emerging teachers navigate the gap between policy ideals and classroom practice during professional formation.

The study is not without limitations. It draws on a relatively small sample of student teachers from one teacher education institution, and the findings are context-specific to selected rural schools. As such, the results are not intended to be generalised across all contexts but rather to offer analytically grounded insights into similar multilingual rural settings. Future research could build on this study by conducting longitudinal investigations that trace student teachers' language practices from pre-service training into their early years of professional teaching. Further research could also examine mentor teachers' perspectives on MT instruction or explore learner outcomes in classrooms where MT and translanguaging practices are consistently implemented.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge that they used Grammarly in the writing of this paper. This tool was used to help improve the language and grammar in the paper.

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