Exploring the Benefits of Code-Switching in Addressing Learners' Challenges of Reading for Meaning and Comprehension in Social Sciences in the Mopani East District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

This study explores the pedagogical advantages of code-switching in addressing the reading comprehension challenges faced by Grade 7 learners in Social Sciences classrooms within the Mopani East District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Grounded in a qualitative methodology and situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the research employed an explanatory case study design. Data were collected from four Social Sciences educators and four learners through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: educators' understanding of code-switching, challenges associated with it, perceived benefits, and strategies for its effective implementation. The findings indicate that educators possess a practical, experience-based understanding of code-switching, applying it intentionally to enhance comprehension, particularly for complex content. While some concerns were raised regarding the potential erosion of English proficiency and misalignment with language policy objectives, educators underscored its role in improving learner engagement, participation, and conceptual clarity. Additionally, the data revealed that learners were more responsive and able to contribute meaningfully when instruction incorporated both English and their home language, Xitsonga. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that code-switching is an essential pedagogical tool in multilingual, rural classrooms, with significant implications for policy, teacher training, and curriculum implementation. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the lived experiences of rural educators and learners, thereby enriching the scholarship on multilingual education within underrepresented contexts in South Africa. The study recommends revising language-in-education policies to reflect the realities of multilingual classrooms, integrating code-switching strategies into teacher training programs, and developing formal guidelines for the regulated and effective use of code-switching in the classroom.

Keyword(s): Code-switching, reading comprehension, multilingual education, Social Sciences, rural classrooms

Introduction

This research was motivated by the inadequate performance observed at the school where the study was conducted. Many learners struggled to answer questions correctly, particularly in content subjects, where they were expected to articulate their thoughts in a four-line paragraph. Guided by Bloom's taxonomy, each assessment across all learning areas should

include higher-order questions, allowing learners to demonstrate their ability to express themselves by applying what they have learned in the classroom to real-life scenarios through extended responses. Social sciences, in particular, feature long-form questions at the end of the last section of the question paper. Additionally, students exhibited poor scores when defining concepts and matching descriptions with the appropriate terms. This challenge significantly impacts their overall academic results, as content subjects like Social Sciences and Natural Science are considered essential for passing; failure in these subjects can lead to a complete academic failure.

In multilingual educational environments, especially in postcolonial societies like South Africa, code-switching has emerged as both a pedagogical necessity and a topic of academic discussion. Code-switching involves the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation or discourse (Auer, 2020; Macswan & Faltis, 2020). This practice is commonly observed in classrooms where the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) differs from the home languages of the learners. In these contexts, teachers often utilize code-switching to bridge linguistic gaps and facilitate comprehension of the content. Liu (2020) describes this practice as a socio-cognitive strategy that dynamically adapts to the communicative demands of the classroom, while Bagwasi and Costley (2022) emphasize its importance as a pragmatic response to the realities faced by multilingual learners in Botswana and other African settings.

Despite its widespread adoption and perceived advantages, code-switching comes with significant challenges. One major concern lies in the tension between official language policies and the realities encountered in classrooms. In numerous African education systems, the promotion of former colonial languages like English as the primary language of instruction has led to the marginalization of indigenous languages (Brock-Utne, 2021; Bagwasi, 2021). Teachers who resort to code-switching often do so in defiance of these policies, resulting in inconsistencies in pedagogical practices (Patmasari & Kamaruddin, 2022). Additionally, code-switching can be viewed as an indicator of insufficient proficiency or ineffective teaching, which contributes to its stigmatization (Heller, 2020). Bonyadi et al. (2021) and Murtiningsih et al. (2022) argue that many educators lack the necessary training to implement code-switching effectively and strategically, often leading to its overuse or unstructured application, which can confuse learners and hinder second language acquisition.

A growing body of research highlights the pedagogical and emotional advantages of code-switching when implemented thoughtfully. Scholars such as Altun (2021) and Olivera (2021) argue that code-switching enhances learner engagement, boosts self-confidence, and alleviates anxiety, particularly for those who encounter challenges with the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). In classroom discussions, it aids in conceptual understanding by enabling learners to link their prior knowledge with new content (Ahsan et al., 2021; Gerungan et al., 2021). From a cognitive perspective, Jiang et al. (2023) show that code-switching activates executive control mechanisms that improve learners' metalinguistic awareness and cognitive flexibility. Furthermore, Crumb et al. (2023) examine how code-switching acts as a means for identity negotiation, especially among culturally and linguistically diverse educators and students, reinforcing their linguistic heritage and promoting inclusive educational environments.

Recognizing its importance, researchers have recommended various strategies to effectively implement code-switching in the classroom. A prevalent approach involves utilizing code-switching for clarifying concepts and reinforcing vocabulary, particularly when introducing abstract or technical terms in subjects like Science or Social Studies (Altun, 2021). Ahsan et al. (2021) advocate for parallel translation, where key ideas are presented in both the target

language and the learners' home language to enhance retention. Other strategies involve using code-switching as a learning scaffold, gradually decreasing its use as students develop proficiency in the language of instruction (Muthusamy et al., 2020). Engaging students in group work and discussions in their home language can also boost participation, especially when followed by summaries or reflections in the second language (Olivera, 2021). Importantly, Goodman and Tastanbek (2021) highlight the necessity for teacher education programs to not only support code-switching but also embrace a translanguaging perspective, encouraging educators to utilize the full linguistic repertoire of their students to foster deeper learning and cultural affirmation.

The literature suggests that code-switching, despite being a topic of debate and often applied inconsistently, remains an essential pedagogical tool in multilingual classrooms. It has the potential to democratize access to knowledge, support learner identity, and improve comprehension when employed thoughtfully. However, effective implementation requires heightened teacher awareness, institutional backing, and alignment with language-in-education policies. This study engages with ongoing discussions by examining how educators and learners in multilingual classrooms, particularly within the South African context, understand, experience, and strategically utilize code-switching.

Students in rural schools where educators exclusively use English during lessons often struggle to grasp concepts and engage effectively in the classroom. This difficulty not only hampers their understanding but also impacts their overall performance, making it challenging for them to respond accurately to lengthy questions and define key concepts. A similar issue was observed in Botswana, where English has been implemented as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in primary schools (Bagwasi, 2021). It was noted that during lessons, both educators and students frequently switched to their home language (HL) to facilitate better engagement with the subject matter, a phenomenon that occurred almost naturally. Muysken (2020) refers to this practice of alternating between a target language—such as English—and a home language or among indigenous languages as code-switching. According to Jones (2023), speakers of various languages in Botswana requested the government to promote their languages as official, like the support given to English and Setswana, with the aim of improving communication and ensuring that all tribes are included in discussions without needing interpreters. However, Jones (2023) also reports that the government dismissed their request, implying that accommodating multiple languages would impose an undue burden on schools, which were not equipped to handle such changes. Furthermore, Jones (2023) indicates that the use of more than two indigenous languages would contradict the national language policy.

Problem Statement

Grade 7 learners in Social Sciences face challenges in defining key concepts and constructing meaningful paragraphs during formative assessments, such as controlled tests. Observations indicate that many students either leave the definition sections blank or provide irrelevant responses, frequently copying unrelated text from the source material. This suggests a lack of comprehension regarding the concepts taught in class, as well as difficulties in processing learning content while studying. Furthermore, learners demonstrate limited ability to express themselves in writing, particularly in long-answer questions worth four marks. A contributing factor appears to be the exclusive use of English as the language of instruction. Students often take longer to grasp explanations delivered in English and show increased engagement and understanding when Xitsonga is incorporated alongside English. During oral interactions, learners prefer to use their mother tongue; without this flexibility, their participation tends to diminish. This aligns with the findings of Smitherman and Alim (2021),

who assert that incorporating learners' mother tongue in English classrooms fosters freer expression and effective communication, especially when students converse in both languages outside the classroom. In light of this research problem, the study raises the following research questions:

- What is your understanding of code switching?

- What are the challenges encountered when code-switching?

- What are the benefits of code switching?

- What are the strategies/ways in which code switching could be applied?

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on multilingual education, and this research investigates the pedagogical use of code-switching, particularly in the under-explored context of rural South Africa. Unlike most studies that concentrate on tertiary or urban settings, this study illuminates how rural educators employ code-switching to navigate language barriers in foundational subjects such as Social Sciences. It highlights teachers' ability to balance the demands of the curriculum, language policy, and the needs of their learners through strategic code-switching, thereby revealing their implicit professional knowledge and agency. Furthermore, the study enhances understanding of code-switching not merely as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a socio-pedagogical strategy that fosters inclusive and meaningful learning in linguistically diverse classrooms.

2. Literature review

2.1 Code switching as a concept

Sinaga and Hutahaean (2020) define code switching as the practice of using two dialects by either educators or students within a school environment. This concept can also be understood as a form of language mixing that occurs among speakers of multiple dialects. The description provided by Sinaga and Hutahaean aligns with the idea of code switching as a communicative strategy employed in various contexts, both formal and informal, incorporating two or more languages to facilitate seamless dialogue. According to Goodman and Tastanbek (2021), code switching occurs between two languages, often utilized within the same sentence to maintain the flow of discussion. Furthermore, the previous explanations indicate that successful code-switching requires the use of at least two languages, whether integrated within a single sentence or alternating throughout a conversation, allowing speakers to blend these languages to ensure uninterrupted dialogue (Muthusamy, Muniandy, Kandasam, Hussin, Subramaniam, and Farashaiyan, 2020). In a classroom context, this implies that both the teacher and students may engage in code switching to ensure that all learners comprehend the material being presented, utilizing languages that are familiar to them.

Intra-sentential code-switching

Intra-sentential code-switching involves the incorporation of a single morpheme or clause alongside words, phrases, and clauses from another dialect within the same sentence (Gosselin & Sabourin, 2021). This practice often includes elements such as verb phrases and complements that function as entire constituents (Jiang, Ma & Chen, 2023). The explanations provided by Jiang, Ma, and Chen primarily focus on the literature and phonetics of speech. To clarify their definition, Assali (2023) describes intra-sentential code-switching as a phenomenon where a speaker alternates between languages or dialects mid-sentence, typically without pauses, indicating fluency in both languages. This form of code-switching is regarded as the most intricate because it requires speakers to navigate the syntactical rules of two languages in a grammatically coherent way. Despite some educators expressing

objections to code-switching, many language teachers, intentionally or inadvertently, engage in this practice while delivering lessons in their classrooms (Malik, Khurshid & Shah, 2021). Even educators who assert that they do not utilize code-switching may occasionally shift from English to their native language, often in moderation. Research indicates that a significant number of educators perceive code-switching as a beneficial tool in the classroom (Juita, Candra, & Winarta, 2022).Intra-sentential code-switching involves the incorporation of a single morpheme or clause alongside words, phrases, and clauses from another dialect within the same sentence (Gosselin & Sabourin, 2021). This practice often includes elements such as verb phrases and complements that function as entire constituents (Jiang, Ma & Chen, 2023). The explanations provided by Jiang, Ma, and Chen primarily focus on the literature and phonetics of speech. To clarify their definition, Assali (2023) describes intra-sentential code-switching as a phenomenon where a speaker alternates between languages or dialects mid-sentence, typically without pauses, indicating fluency in both languages. This form of code-switching is regarded as the most intricate because it requires speakers to navigate the syntactical rules of two languages in a grammatically coherent way. Despite some educators expressing objections to code-switching, many language teachers, intentionally or inadvertently, engage in this practice while delivering lessons in their classrooms (Malik, Khurshid & Shah, 2021). Even educators who assert that they do not utilize code-switching may occasionally shift from English to their native language, often in moderation. Research indicates that a significant number of educators perceive code-switching as a beneficial tool in the classroom (Juita, Candra, & Winarta, 2022).

Inter-sentential code-switching

Assali (2023) posits that inter-sentential code-switching occurs when a speaker completes a sentence in one dialect and subsequently shifts to another dialect for the following sentence. This understanding suggests that the act of switching languages is intentional, reflecting the speaker's proficiency in both languages used during a single conversation or speech. In a classroom context, inter-sentential code-switching refers to the transition from a home language to English at the sentential level within the same conversational turn (Lam and Matthews, 2020). This distinction highlights that, unlike intra-sentential code-switching, which involves language mixing within a single sentence, inter-sentential code-switching occurs at the conclusion of a sentence. Thus, in this form of code-switching, the speaker completes a sentence before making the switch. According to Un Nissa, Masood, and Iqbal (2023), inter-sentential code-switching is a distinct and easily recognizable form of code-switching, noticeable to all parties involved. Furthermore, the speaker is typically very aware of the language switch as it takes place at the end of a sentence. For this reason, many scholars regard inter-sentential code-switching as the primary form of code-switching (Fauziati, Widiastuti, Darussalam, 2020).

2.2 Challenges of using English only in content subjects.

The employment of English across various subjects is often regarded as crucial for enhancing learners' proficiency. However, the exclusive use of English in primary education may pose significant challenges (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

Ability to speak and make sense of text

A challenge was observed among Spanish learners: they struggled to apply the language rules necessary to generate English syntax, even after the teacher explained how this was accomplished in English. Some students found it difficult to understand the teacher's explanations, and most of them were unable to meet the expectations set by their instructor. A similar issue was noted in other subjects, where students could not effectively respond to

tasks assigned following an English-only lesson. To address this problem, the teacher implemented a superscripting mechanism known as a language tag (Macswan and Faltis, 2020).

Constructing meaningful sentences using LoLT

Aizawa, Rose, Thompson, and Curle (2023) demonstrate that when students faced challenges in writing meaningful sentences in English, a proactive solution was implemented: code-switching. Upon recognizing that learners struggled to grasp the core concepts of the lesson and did not meet its objectives, the teacher decided to incorporate code-switching by mixing English with the students' home languages during the lesson's re-presentation. Furthermore, Aizawa, Rose, Thompson, and Curle observed that learners were unable to engage effectively when the educator enforced an English-only policy during presentations (Dos Santos, 2020).

Being competent

Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) suggest that excessive code-switching may hinder students' ability to compete with their peers who consistently use English in their classes. Furthermore, learners who engage with English across multiple subjects, rather than relying solely on their home languages, tend to demonstrate greater competence in making presentations and articulating their thoughts in English. Additionally, it has been observed that students who frequently use English exhibit more confidence in responding to questions, even if their answers are incorrect. In contrast, those who struggle with English often find it difficult to express themselves fully, even when they know the correct answers (Wau, 2022). Ho (2020) asserts that students who use English in content and mathematics subjects appear to perform better than those who typically rely on their home languages for classroom expression. Cenoz and Gorter (2020) further argue that learners proficient in English are more likely to grasp concepts and understand the material presented by their teachers during lessons. However, this perspective may be misleading, as there are students who are proficient in English or use it as their home language but still face challenges in various content and mathematics subjects.

Affecting the use of LoLT and causing spelling errors

Gerungan, Olii, and Andries (2021) demonstrate that code-switching can hinder the achievement of additional language skills and may lead to reduced accuracy and clarity in academic writing. Scholars such as Kumar, Nukapangu, and Hassan (2021) argue that the use of one's home language in school generally reflects laziness, incompetence, and a deficiency in teaching effectiveness. They further contend that code-switching may stem from either the teacher's lack of competence or the learners' unpreparedness and reluctance to engage with the medium of instruction, which is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). Ulfah, Tsuraya, and Risal (2021) expand on this by noting that some learners may experience fear of the unfamiliar or a sense of embarrassment; consequently, they often prefer to communicate in their home language or remain silent even when they have the correct answers. This behavior illustrates a lack of self-confidence among learners. In essence, code-switching not only fosters a sense of laziness, as discussed by Kumar, Nukapangu, and Hassan, but also indicates that learners may not recognize the importance of tackling challenging tasks, such as presenting in the medium of instruction and diligently working to master LoLT, as the curriculum requires.

2.3   Benefits of code-switching noted in other countries.

The study done by Abdulloh (2021) about the benefits of code-switching shows that code-switching serves several purposes for both teachers and learners.

Encourage classroom engagement

Murtiningsih, Munawaroh, and Hidayatulloh (2022) assert that incorporating the mother tongue in English classrooms allows students to express themselves more freely. This perspective has led them to conclude that code-switching is beneficial for both teachers and learners across various subjects. Similarly, Adler, Valdes Kroff, and Novick (2020) highlight that when tasked with group projects, students tend to prefer communicating in their home language with peers rather than using the medium of instruction, as it facilitates deeper and more convenient discussions in a language they fully comprehend. Furthermore, Pintado Gutierrez (2021) emphasizes that code-switching provides learners the freedom to articulate their thoughts and fosters a comfortable speaking environment within the classroom and among peers. Additionally, Goodman and Tastanbek (2021) note that Indonesia's multicultural landscape, which encompasses diverse backgrounds, has enhanced the awareness of a shared linguistic identity. This awareness has significantly improved various learning contexts, including English, as teachers and educators are equipped with alternative strategies to address obstacles that may hinder students from reaching their immediate educational goals.

Support teaching and learning

The incorporation of local languages, such as Javanese and Bataknese, empowers learners to engage actively in the classroom. Additionally, integrating these languages enhances students' ability to gauge their understanding relative to that of the educator (Dalziel, Guarda, Paulsrud, Tian, and Toth, 2021). Furthermore, when a teacher introduces a new concept with which students may be unfamiliar, code-switching can prove to be both valuable and efficient. It allows the teacher to provide clear explanations, offer illustrations, give relatable examples, and address students' questions more effectively (Savski, 2024). This perspective is further supported by Wei (2020), who contends that code-switching acts as a bridge in the teaching and learning process. Based on the insights shared by various authors, I can assert that the use of home languages has a significantly positive impact in primary schools.

To give clear instructions and instill confidence

Effectively managing classroom disruptions, such as noise, is essential during lessons. Educators often find that delivering instructions or warnings in students' home languages significantly enhances effectiveness, as primary school learners typically respond better to the language they understand most clearly. Liu (2020) suggests that when a learner struggles with comprehension, code-switching can be employed to simplify the material and facilitate the learning process. This perspective is echoed by Rincon and Hollis (2020), who assert that code-switching enhances classroom instruction. Additionally, Majola and Cekiso (2023) argue that code-switching activates learners' prior knowledge, making it easier for them to recall information presented in their home language. Similarly, Archila, Molina, and De Mejia (2021) highlight that using the home language alongside English boosts learners' confidence, motivation, and their relationships with educators. Abdulloh (2021) underscores the significance of code-switching in various classroom contexts, such as providing instructions or clarifying challenging concepts for learners with limited English proficiency. KA and Ambarini (2022) agree, noting that code-switching helps overcome learning barriers by simplifying complex ideas. Furthermore, Khoe, Kootstra, Kaan, Schoonen, and Frank (2024) argue that code-switching benefits not only learners but also educators, as it saves time, bridges communication gaps, and enhances students' understanding of challenging content.

To advance the understanding of complex concepts

In classrooms, many learners, including those who may take longer to grasp certain information, often exhibit greater activity, enthusiasm, and the ability to articulate what they have learned by the end of the lesson to their classmates and the teacher. Code-switching plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between teachers and learners, particularly in situations where students struggle to engage in smooth discussions during lessons, especially when expected to respond to oral questions in English or express their views on concepts they fear may be misunderstood (Radomskaya, 2024). AlNabhani (2024) argues that code-switching is particularly significant in content subjects, as it facilitates a connection between teachers and students when they face challenges in presenting their ideas or relating the knowledge acquired during the lesson to real-life situations. In this context, code-switching helps alleviate anxiety in learners and enhances understanding, especially for those who may struggle with the target language.

2.4 Effective ways to represent strategies of code-switching

While code-switching can be viewed as beneficial, there should be guidelines for implementing it, and that should always be considered by the teacher whenever they contemplate switching.

Have a policy that governs the practice of code-switching.

Khosa and Zitha (2024) propose criteria for implementing code-switching in classroom instruction across various subjects, including languages, mathematics, and content areas. They advocate for a balanced distribution of 50/50 between languages, particularly in mathematics and content subjects where language rules are less pervasive. However, they caution that this alternation should not replace the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT); rather, it should serve to enhance the learning objectives, especially in scenarios where students struggle to grasp the material. Brock-Utne (2021) provides a sociolinguistic perspective, asserting that dialects are social constructs shaped by colonial powers that historically categorized them as measurable social objects. She argues for equal treatment of all languages and dialects, regardless of whether they are used in home or educational contexts. Similarly, Romanowski (2021) emphasizes that the manner in which individuals utilize dialects is more significant than the labels assigned to them. These viewpoints bolster the pedagogical value of incorporating indigenous dialects in the classroom when they align appropriately with instructional goals. For example, switching to a familiar language when introducing new vocabulary can greatly enhance comprehension and facilitate learning.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Translanguaging Theory (TT), a contemporary framework that redefines how multilingual learners interact with language in educational contexts. Initially introduced by García (2009, 2012) and further developed by García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017), translanguaging challenges the idea that multilingual individuals compartmentalize their languages. Instead, it conceptualizes language practices as fluid, allowing speakers to draw from their complete linguistic repertoire to create meaning, communicate effectively, and support their academic growth. In educational settings, translanguaging serves not only as a linguistic behavior but also as a pedagogical and cognitive strategy that enhances learning opportunities and affirms learners' identities (García et al., 2017). This theory emerged in response to deficit perspectives on bilingualism, particularly in postcolonial contexts where indigenous African languages are often sidelined in favor of colonial languages such as English. Scholars like Probyn (2015) and Maseko (2022) argue that translanguaging positions code-switching as a valid instructional tool that reflects the genuine linguistic practices of learners. In rural Limpopo classrooms, where Xitsonga is the primary home language and

English functions as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), translanguaging provides a crucial bridge for enhancing conceptual understanding in Social Sciences. As noted by García and Kleifgen (2019), it enables learners to activate their prior knowledge in their home language while simultaneously developing academic literacy in English, which is vital for mastering content areas that require higher-order thinking and effective writing. This study found that Grade 7 learners encountered difficulties in defining Social Sciences concepts and composing coherent responses in English. When teachers incorporated Xitsonga explanations and bilingual questioning, there was a marked improvement in learner engagement and comprehension. These results align with the findings of Charamba and Zano (2019), which indicated that translanguaging strategies significantly boosted understanding and participation in South African science classrooms. Translanguaging also acts as a cognitive scaffold. Probyn (2019) notes that educators utilize it to clarify abstract concepts, reinforce key vocabulary, and facilitate dialogue—supportive structures that can gradually diminish as learners gain confidence in English. This approach, known as pedagogical translanguaging, is particularly crucial in under-resourced, linguistically diverse classrooms. Furthermore, translanguaging affirms learners' linguistic and cultural identities. In policy environments that prioritize English, the integration of indigenous languages like Xitsonga in the classroom fosters a sense of recognition and value among learners. Maseko (2022) and Majola and Cekiso (2023) highlight that this inclusivity cultivates learner-centered environments where multilingualism is celebrated as a strength rather than perceived as an obstacle. In this study, learners exhibited increased motivation and participation during oral tasks when both English and Xitsonga were employed.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative methodological framework was employed, as outlined by Borgstede and Scholz (2021), to investigate and provide insightful perspectives on real-world issues. Taherdoost (2022) further clarifies that the qualitative research approach involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data in order to understand concepts, opinions, and human experiences. Additionally, Taherdoost emphasizes that this approach can be used to derive comprehensive insights into specific problems or to generate innovative ideas for research. According to Butler (2023), qualitative research is particularly valuable for gaining insights into the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of participants. In this context, the data is typically non-experimental and not subject to mathematical analysis; rather, the analysis is focused on observing, classifying, comparing, and evaluating the collected data. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of both teachers and learners regarding the use of code-switching in Social Sciences classes, intending to enhance conceptual understanding (Gladovic, Tai, & Dawson, 2022).

Research paradigm

This research utilizes the interpretivism paradigm. According to Nickerson (2024), a paradigm consists of a set of concepts and perspectives that provide a framework or model for researchers. It outlines the existing body of knowledge, the nature of the topic under investigation, appropriate research methodologies, and suitable approaches for data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, Khatri (2020) describes the interpretivism paradigm as a methodological approach in the social sciences that highlights the importance of understanding individuals' beliefs, motivations, and reasoning within their social context to comprehensively interpret the significance of the evidence gathered about a phenomenon.

3.4. Research design

An explanatory design, as the name suggests, was utilized to present findings on the effectiveness of code-switching in enhancing learners' comprehension of Social Sciences concepts in the Mopani East District. The research adopted a case study approach characterized by its explanatory nature, which is why it is referred to as an illustrative case study. According to Headley and Plano Clark (2020), a case study research design within a qualitative framework involves an in-depth analysis of a specific subject, such as an individual, group, location, event, organization, or phenomenon. They emphasize that this research design is a valuable method for obtaining detailed, contextual, and profound insights into a particular real-world topic.

Research Site

This study was conducted in the Mopani East District, specifically within the Lulekani Circuit of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Participants were chosen from a primary school located in a remote rural area of the Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality, where many students struggle with English proficiency. The school is nestled among farms, which many of the learners hope to work on in the future.

Sampling

The study involved four educators from the social sciences, chosen from a larger pool of 44 learners and 9 educators. The experimental group consisted of two male teachers, while the control group was made up of two female teachers. A purposive sampling method, as outlined by Hossan, Dato' Mansor, and Jaharuddin (2023), was utilized to select respondents who were most likely to provide insightful and relevant information for the research. A summary of the participants' demographic information can be found in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

PARTICIPANTS		
Codes	**Educators**	**Gender**
E1	Educator 1	Female
E2	Educator 2	Male
E3	Educator 3	Female
E4	Educator 4	Male

Data collection

This study utilized two qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. An observation protocol was employed to systematically document teaching and learning activities within Social Sciences classrooms, focusing particularly on the teacher's language usage when explaining concepts. This included instances of using only the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) as well as alternating between English and the home language (Xitsonga). Classroom observations enabled the researcher to capture real-time interactions and instructional strategies in their natural context, in line with Kumar and Sharma's (2023) definition of observation as a systematic technique for collecting data on behaviors, actions, or physical characteristics as they occur. Likewise, Uwamusi and Ajisebiyawo (2023) emphasize that observation requires the researcher to be physically

present to record events and actions as they take place, whether in an organized group setting or a formal institution.

To enhance these observations, semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather in-depth insights into participants' viewpoints, practices, and perceptions regarding language use and learner understanding. Knott, Rao, and Summers (2022) emphasize that interviews are essential in qualitative research for collecting rich, contextual data. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) describe semi-structured interviews as a flexible method that involves face-to-face interactions, allowing interviewers to delve into specific topics while giving participants the freedom to express their thoughts openly. In this study, interviews were conducted in person with participants during break times and after school, based on prior arrangements. An interview guide was utilized to ensure consistency and maintain focus on the study's objectives. This approach created a comfortable environment where participants could respond freely and without hesitation, thereby facilitating authentic and relevant responses.

Data analysis

The data gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations in this study were analyzed employing thematic analysis. This method proved effective for organizing and examining the data. According to Dawadi (2020), thematic analysis serves as a means for exploring qualitative data, which involves scrutinizing a dataset to identify themes and uncover patterns in the meanings expressed within it. The researcher utilized thematic analysis following steps rooted in grounded theory, starting with the coding process. This initial step was crucial for collecting data through semi-structured interviews and observations, aimed at assessing the effectiveness of code-switching in enhancing learners' understanding of Social Sciences concepts in primary schools. By sharpening the understanding, this step enabled the researcher to systematically arrange the gathered data and evaluate the accuracy of the assertions presented in the problem statement. Thematic analysis, typically applied to a collection of texts such as interview transcripts, was employed to carefully investigate the data and identify recurring themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning (Caulfield, 2022).

Findings

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes derived from findings

Theme	Sub-theme	Description
Educators' Understanding of Code-Switching	Conceptual Awareness	Educators understand code-switching as the use of both home language and English in teaching.
	Pedagogical Intentions	Teachers consciously apply code-switching to support learner comprehension.
Challenges Associated with Code-Switching	Impairment of English Language Proficiency	Overuse may reduce learners' spelling accuracy and fluency in English.

	Disruption of Language Policy Goals	Learners may overly rely on the home language, weakening the role of English as LoLT.
Perceived Benefits of Code-Switching	Enhanced Learner Comprehension	Learners better understand lesson content when code-switching is used strategically.
	Instructional Support for Educators	Code-switching helps teachers explain difficult terms and improve classroom communication.
Strategies for Effective Use of Code-Switching	Situational and Contextual Application	Effective when used sparingly, such as at the end of a sentence or in response to confusion.
	Need for Regulation and Guidelines	Importance of setting rules to ensure code-switching supports rather than replaces English usage.

Data from the interviews

What is your understanding of the concept of code-switching?

Many educators seem to be informed about this concept of code switching. Though each had their way of presenting their understanding, the ideas are common. Educator 3 defines code switching as follows:

"Code switching is when a teacher uses vernacular together with English in the classroom."

This explanation shares the same view as educator 2, who said:

"Code switching is the process of applying learners' native language during the process of teaching and learning."

Both explanations presented illustrate that code switching is a practice of mixing home language with English (LoLT) in the school setting to improve learners' understanding. These results imply that educators are aware of the meaning of code switching, also they have an idea of what they are doing when mixing languages during the lessons.

What are the challenges encountered when code-switching?

Code switching also has its challenges, which can hurt learners or in the language of learning and teaching if not appropriately practiced. In her experience of code switching, Educator 1 says that:

"Most learners struggle to write correct spellings in English, also when code switching is over, practice learners tend to forget that they are expected to speak, engage, and express themselves in English always."

In support of educator 1, educator 4 indicates that:

"The challenge of code-switching is that it affects the language of teaching as learners feel more comfortable in using their home language instead of English."

The assertion of sampled educators implies that though code switching can be more helpful, if it is not appropriately practiced, it can cause more damage to the future of learners and the language of learning and teaching.

What are the benefits of code switching?

The practice of mixing languages in the classroom appears to be very important as it supports teaching and learning, also to better understand the material that learners use during lessons. Educator 4 is of the view that code switching improves learners' understanding, as per his response below:

"According to my observations, when doing code switching, I have noted that it enables learners to learn with good understanding."

In his illustration, educator 2 supports the assertion of educator 4 by saying:

"My experience of code switching has made me realise that code switching benefits learners and me as an educator. For learners, it enables them to understand the content with ease, and on my side, it enables me to break down words that are challenging to learners so they can understand them better and be able to use those words in their explanations when presenting their views."

These results imply that code switching is of good use in teaching as well as beneficial to learners in improving their understanding of concepts and making sense of what the teachers teach during the lessons.

What are the strategies/ways in which code switching could be applied?

From the participants' responses and what the researcher has observed, it appears that the practice of mixing languages within a sentence at the end of a sentence is ideal when there are rules that regulate the practice. This is to ensure that code switching is used only when there is a need, not to replace the language of learning with teaching.

Data from the observations

This section delineates the researcher's observations conducted during a social sciences lesson, specifically focusing on the instances of code-switching employed by both the teacher and the learners. The findings substantiate that code-switching serves as an effective pedagogical strategy, particularly within content areas such as social sciences. Notably, the researcher identified a common misconception among some educators who conflate code-switching with translation. Translation is defined as the process of substituting a source language text with a corresponding and logically equivalent text in the target language. This definition emphasizes the distinction between code-switching and translation, as the former

involves the integration of multiple languages within a single sentence or discourse. Although these two terms may occasionally be used interchangeably, they represent fundamentally different linguistic phenomena, necessitating a clear demarcation.

Furthermore, the observations revealed that educators exhibited significant concern regarding students' proficiency in English. This concern was corroborated by the researcher's finding that learners encountered difficulties with inter-sentential code-switching. The results indicate that a considerable number of learners are not yet fluent in English, which compels them to utilize code-switching as a means to articulate their thoughts, respond to questions, and seek clarification.

The majority of learners expressed confidence in their proficiency in their home language, Xitsonga, and felt they could speak and express themselves fluently. Some demonstrated a strong willingness to attempt using English in short sentences, indicating that a few learners had a moderate level of understanding and speaking ability in the language of instruction (LoLT). In terms of the teachers, the challenges of using English exclusively were not prevalent; however, code-switching was unavoidable. At times, teachers found themselves conversing with their own thoughts while managing a class of 44 learners. When presenting lessons in English, only the students would observe the teacher as they spoke, wrote on the chalkboard, and erased, while remaining silent themselves. Although a few learners were able to follow along, many others were present physically but did not engage in the lesson. This lack of understanding became evident when they struggled to answer questions during class activities on content that had just been presented. Conversely, when lessons were delivered with a mix of LoLT and Xitsonga, the majority of learners actively participated and were able to respond to questions effectively.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study on code-switching in Grade 7 Social Sciences classrooms in rural Limpopo indicate that educators possess a solid conceptual understanding of code-switching but implement it pragmatically to address linguistic and pedagogical needs. The following discussion delves into the four emergent themes related to existing scholarship, drawing comparisons, highlighting contrasts, and providing new interpretations.

Theme 1: Educators' understanding of code-switching

Sub-theme 1.1: Conceptual awareness

The study revealed that educators perceive code-switching as the incorporation of students' native languages alongside English within the classroom. Rather than defining it through a strictly linguistic lens, they emphasized its functional role in enhancing comprehension. This perspective is consistent with Muysken (2020), who identifies code-switching as a sociolinguistic strategy shaped by communicative necessity rather than by rigid grammatical constraints. Auer (2020) further supports this view, highlighting that classroom code-switching often embodies pragmatic adaptations rather than adhering to established bilingual rules. Moreover, the way these educators conceptualize code-switching indicates a form of "practitioner knowledge," which is informed by the realities of daily classroom experiences rather than formal training. Although they may not employ technical terms like "intra-sentential" or "inter-sentential" switching (Assali, 2023), their intuitive understanding of the concept is both sophisticated and context specific. This practical, experience-based knowledge also illustrates what Mar (2023) refers to as "tacit expertise" among practitioners—an aspect frequently overlooked in top-down policy discussions.

Sub-theme 1.2: Pedagogical intentions

Educators participating in this study exhibited an intentional approach to code-switching as a means to enhance learning. Their insights align with the findings of Gerungan et al. (2021), who noted that educators frequently utilize code-switching to bridge comprehension gaps and facilitate content understanding. This practical application contrasts with critiques such as those posed by Heller (2020), who cautions that code-switching may inadvertently reinforce linguistic hierarchies. However, the current study suggests that in linguistically diverse and under-resourced settings like rural Limpopo, code-switching serves more as a pedagogical necessity than a political manoeuvre.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that teachers are cultivating strategic competence in making decisions about when, how, and why to switch codes. This idea is supported by Crumb et al. (2023), who highlight the relationship between teacher identity and code-switching choices. This sense of agency reveals a more nuanced level of professionalism, as educators employ code-switching not just as a remedial tool but also as a scaffolding technique that fosters deeper engagement with academic language. Such agency calls into question the binary classification of code-switching as either "appropriate" or "deviant," advocating instead for a contextual and culturally sensitive pedagogical framework (Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020).

Theme 2: Challenges associated with code-switching

Sub-theme 2.1: Impairment of English language proficiency

A significant concern raised by participants is that excessive code-switching may undermine learners' proficiency in English, especially in writing and spelling. Educator narratives echo the sentiments expressed by Ahsan et al. (2021), who argue that while the first language (L1) can facilitate comprehension, its overuse may hinder English acquisition. Similarly, Bagwasi and Costley (2022) warn that a persistent reliance on L1 could diminish learners' motivation to master the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), reinforcing linguistic inertia. However, the findings of this study reveal a more nuanced perspective: while teachers acknowledge these drawbacks, they contend that completely avoiding code-switching would disadvantage learners even further. In situations where English is predominantly encountered in formal educational settings, depriving learners of their L1 may heighten feelings of alienation and exacerbate inequalities. This tension indicates that instead of dismissing code-switching, educators are navigating a delicate trade-off between immediate comprehension and long-term language development—an observation that underscores the pressing need for differentiated, context-responsive language support (Macswan & Faltis, 2020).

Sub-theme 2.2: Disruption of language policy goals

Educators have observed that frequent code-switching may contradict policy objectives aimed at promoting English fluency. This tension aligns with Brock-Utne's (2021) critique of African language-in-education policies, which often prioritize English while neglecting the practical realities of multilingual classrooms. The current findings support the argument that rigid adherence to monolingual policies in multilingual settings is both impractical and counterproductive (Bagwasi, 2021). However, this study demonstrates that teachers are not outright rejecting the language policy; rather, they are pragmatically adapting it to suit their context—an important nuance often overlooked in policy discussions. This insight raises questions about the feasibility of one-size-fits-all language policies in linguistically diverse

countries like South Africa. In this study, teachers actively reinterpret policy through their practice, embodying what Romanowski (2021) describes as a transformation from a "perceived lack of agency" to an "enacted agency." Their adaptive strategies reflect a grassroots resistance to prescriptive policies and highlight the necessity of incorporating teacher perspectives in language policy reform. This finding contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for multilingual education policies that accurately represent the realities of classroom language ecologies (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020).

Theme 3: Perceived benefits of code-switching

Sub-theme 3.1: Enhanced learner comprehension

Participants reported that code-switching enhances learners' understanding, particularly of complex concepts. This assertion is well-supported by existing literature. Both Murtiningsih et al. (2022) and Altun (2021) found that strategic code-switching facilitates access to curriculum content and boosts learners' confidence. Similarly, Olivera (2021) observed that code-switching enhances learner engagement and classroom participation. What sets the current study apart is the educators' observation that improved comprehension correlates with the ability to retain and utilize new English vocabulary, positioning code-switching as a scaffold rather than a crutch. Additionally, the practice of code-switching may serve an emotional function by alleviating learner anxiety and promoting participation, particularly among those facing challenges with English proficiency. This aligns with the findings of Crumb et al. (2023), who argue that code-switching can affirm learners' cultural and linguistic identities, ultimately enhancing motivation and inclusivity. In this context, code-switching serves not merely as a linguistic bridge, but as a pedagogical tool that fosters both academic and emotional safety—an essential aspect in rural, under-resourced schools where students may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Sub-theme 3.2: Instructional support for educators

Educators also gain from code-switching, utilizing it to clarify meanings and adjust the pace of their instruction. This perspective aligns with the findings of Crumb et al. (2023), who noted that educators employ code-switching to express empathy and build rapport with their students. Furthermore, Goodman and Tastanbek (2021) contend that this practice should not be viewed merely as code-switching, but rather as a component of a broader translanguaging pedagogy that validates all linguistic resources within the learning process. This study bolsters that viewpoint by demonstrating how code-switching enables teachers to simplify content while preserving academic rigor. Importantly, educators recognized that their mastery of English vocabulary was sometimes limited, and that code-switching facilitated more effective classroom communication. This honest acknowledgment supports the findings of Patmasari and Kamaruddin (2022), who highlighted that code-switching serves as a compensatory strategy for teachers with limited linguistic proficiency. Consequently, the practice not only enhances learner comprehension but also helps maintain teacher confidence and instructional flow—an essential yet often overlooked aspect of classroom dynamics.

Theme 4: Strategies for effective use of code-switching

Sub-theme 4.1: Situational and contextual application

Participants concurred that code-switching is most effective when employed selectively, such as at the conclusion of an English sentence to enhance comprehension. This observation is supported by Sinaga and Hutahaean (2020), who noted that balanced intra-sentential code-switching improves communication without confusing learners. Similarly, Jiang et al. (2023) found that cognitive engagement remains elevated when students are exposed to systematic

and predictable switches. This strategic application of code-switching exemplifies what Liu (2020) terms "socio-cognitive adaptation," wherein educators intuitively modify their language in response to classroom dynamics. In practice, this indicates that code-switching is not arbitrary but rather tailored according to learners' responses, the complexity of the subject matter, and the objectives of the lesson. The educators' ability to discern when a switch is necessary reflects a form of "linguistic sensitivity" that, while challenging to standardize in formal policy, is vital for effective multilingual instruction (Gosselin & Sabourin, 2021).

Sub-theme 4.2: Need for regulation and guidelines

Teachers have expressed a need for formal guidelines to guide code-switching practices. This aligns with findings from Bonyadi et al. (2021), which emphasize that the absence of institutional policies on code-switching leaves educators uncertain about its effective implementation. However, this study demonstrates that even without such policies, teachers develop intuitive strategies that focus on clarity and the needs of their learners—an essential insight that shifts the discourse from top-down regulation to bottom-up professional agency. Furthermore, the call for clear guidelines arises not from a desire for constraints but from a need for consistency, professional development, and institutional acknowledgment. As highlighted by Muthusamy et al. (2020), when teachers engage in training on multilingual pedagogy, their confidence in applying code-switching significantly increases. The educators in this study are not simply improvising; they are seeking structured support to enhance their practice. This underscores a disparity between policy intentions and classroom realities, indicating a pressing need for a professional framework that validates code-switching as an effective pedagogical strategy.

Limitations of the Study

Although the findings provide valuable insights, the study does have its limitations. Firstly, the research was carried out in a single rural primary school located in the Mopani East District, involving a small sample of four educators and four learners. This narrow scope limits the generalizability of the findings to wider educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the benefits of code-switching in addressing the challenges Grade 7 learners face in reading for meaning and comprehension within Social Sciences classrooms at a rural school in the Mopani East District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Utilizing qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, the research revealed that educators employ code-switching not only as a spontaneous communicative tool but also as a deliberate pedagogical strategy to bridge the gap between English—the language of learning and teaching (LoLT)—and the learners' home language, Xitsonga. Four key findings emerged from the study: educators demonstrated a context-sensitive understanding of code-switching; they intentionally and strategically used it to enhance comprehension; they recognized its dual impact on both English proficiency and adherence to language policy; and there is a need for clearer professional guidelines regarding its regulated use. Educators acknowledged both the advantages and disadvantages of code-switching. On one hand, it facilitated improved learner comprehension, engagement, and confidence; on the other hand, concerns were raised about the possibility of overuse hindering the development of English literacy. Despite this tension, the study underscores the professional agency and adaptive capacity of rural teachers as they navigate complex linguistic, pedagogical, and policy demands within under-resourced classrooms. Classroom observations reinforced these insights, demonstrating that learners engaged more actively

and meaningfully when instruction involved a strategic blend of English and their home language.

Recommendations

The study advocates for a comprehensive re-evaluation of language-in-education policies to align with the complexities inherent in multilingual classroom environments. It emphasizes the integration of code-switching methodologies within teacher training curricula and the establishment of formalized classroom protocols to ensure the systematic and effective implementation of code-switching practices.

Declarations

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