



Translanguaging: A Pedagogical Approach to the Teaching of English in Zimbabwean Rural Secondary Schools

Precious Dube¹, Kufakunesu Zano^{2*}

¹Faculty of Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, ^{2*}Faculty of Education,
Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

*Corresponding Author. Email: kzano@wsu.ac.za

Abstract: This study aims to explore the effectiveness of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach for enhancing the teaching of English in rural secondary schools in the Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. The study employed an exploratory, qualitative case study design with semi-structured interviews. This was selected because it enabled an in-depth examination of the effectiveness of translanguaging in teaching and learning of English. Eight teachers teaching English additional language at Forms Three and Four levels in four selected rural secondary schools were purposively selected. The translanguaging theory underpinned this study. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic approach. Findings revealed that learners in rural secondary schools face numerous challenges when learning English, including limited exposure to the English language, inadequate learning materials, and language barriers, among others. The study highlighted that translanguaging is a means of bridging the linguistic gap between rural students and English, thereby fostering more equitable educational opportunities. The implications of this research extend beyond rural Zimbabwe, as translanguaging offers a versatile and inclusive instructional technique that can be adapted to other multilingual contexts worldwide. The study recommends integrating bilingual texts, dictionaries, and multilingual digital applications (where possible) into classrooms to assist learners in their mother tongue and in English. It also recommends designing translanguaging-based collaborative learning activities and using local cultural materials (e.g., folktales and drama), real-life examples, and local experiences in lessons to enhance students' motivation and engagement. Teachers need to be trained in effective translanguaging pedagogies through workshops and seminars so they can teach English effectively in rural areas using translanguaging.

Article History

Received: 20-09-2025

Revised: 07-05-2026

Accepted: 18-06-2026

Published: 20-07-2026

Key Words:

English First Additional
Language; Bilingualism;
Multilingualism;
Multilingual Contexts;
Translanguaging.

How to Cite: Dube, P., & Zano, K. (2026). Translanguaging: A Pedagogical Approach to the Teaching of English in Zimbabwean Rural Secondary Schools. *Jurnal Paedagogy*, 13(3), 928-938. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jp.v13i3.17643>



<https://doi.org/10.33394/jp.v13i3.17643>

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Introduction

Globally, English is recognised as the language of education, business, communication, and science and technology. English language proficiency is highly valued as it provides learners with access to higher education, employment opportunities and global knowledge networks (Crystal, 2012). In Zimbabwe, English is very important because it is the official language of government and administration, commerce, law, and higher education. English is also the primary language of instruction in secondary and tertiary education and a key requirement for academic and professional success (Johnson, 2022). Success in most school subjects and national examinations is largely dependent on learners' proficiency in English. In multilingual societies like Zimbabwe, English is used as a gateway to socioeconomic mobility and success, and is a requirement for transitioning to A-level,



college, or university, and for job-seeking. Failing to have an English O-level qualification means, you cannot proceed in any direction. However, many learners struggle to attain proficiency because English is learnt as a second or third language (Maseko, 2022).

According to Jakaza (2013), as cited in Dube, Mugomba and Gumbo (2022), Zimbabwe, like many other African countries, is a multilingual country whose citizens speak a variety of indigenous languages and dialects. It has 16 officially acknowledged languages, including English (Sibanda, 2018), but the most widely spoken languages are Shona, Ndebele and English. English is the official language of instruction in secondary and tertiary education. However, linguistic realities of rural schools pose a great challenge for teachers. Most, if not all, learners in rural communities use indigenous languages as their primary languages of communication at home, outside the classroom, and on the playing grounds. English is seen as a language of the classroom only, with exposure outside the classroom very limited (Maseko, 2022). Shortages of textbooks, inadequate library facilities, limited access to digital learning technologies and insufficient teaching and learning materials are some other challenges hindering the effective teaching of English. Books donated by non-governmental organisations are very few and may be shared at a ratio of 1 to 5 pupils. In some cases, learners rely on their indigenous languages or the teacher's explanation to understand concepts and participate in classroom activities. Teachers find themselves alternating between English and local languages to facilitate understanding, despite policies that traditionally favour English-only instruction. According to studies conducted in Zimbabwe, translanguaging naturally occurs in multilingual classrooms because teachers and learners draw upon multiple linguistic resources to support teaching and learning (Dube, Mugomba & Gumbo, 2022; Bhebe et al., 2025). This improves comprehension and participation.

According to research, when multilingual learners are allowed to use their full linguistic repertoires, they can effectively learn a new language (Garcia & Wei, 2022). Translanguaging is a dynamic pedagogical method of language instruction that has gained importance in recent decades because it identifies and capitalises on students' multilingual abilities (Smith, 2023). Translanguaging has therefore come as a crucial pedagogical approach that enables learners to use both English and their indigenous languages to facilitate participation, understanding and language development (Baker, 2011). Translanguaging, therefore, is a valuable strategy for addressing the linguistic and educational challenges faced by learners in rural secondary schools.

Translanguaging practices occur in Zimbabwean multilingual classrooms, but research on their application in Zimbabwean secondary school English language classrooms remains limited. Many existing studies have focused on primary education, general multilingual classroom practices, or the teaching of STEM subjects using translanguaging (Bhebe et al., 2025; Dube, Mugomba & Gumbo, 2022), and little has been done concerning rural secondary school English classrooms, especially in the Chirumanzu area. Available literature has also focused on examining the effectiveness of translanguaging broadly, without providing in-depth insights into how teachers in rural secondary schools perceive, implement, and experience translanguaging in the teaching of English. To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach in Chirumanzu. A case study allows for an in-depth exploration of how translanguaging is used in teaching and learning of English language and how learners experience this approach in a natural classroom setting (Yin, 2018). Chirumanzu District provides a relevant context for investigation because it is predominantly rural, multilingual, and characterised by many educational challenges



commonly experienced in Zimbabwean rural schools. By focusing on a rural multilingual setting, the study seeks to contribute to the development of effective and inclusive pedagogical strategies for English Language teaching in Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Research Method

The research approach was qualitative and descriptive. Qualitative research enables researchers to experience the daily struggles of participants when confronted with real-life situations and to understand people's lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The study employed an exploratory case study, a research method that involves a detailed examination of a subject (the "case") in its real-life context (Hassan, 2024).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers teaching Forms Three and Four English language at four selected rural secondary schools in Chirumanzu District, who were purposively selected to participate in this study. Two teachers were selected from each school. The involvement of these subject teachers was crucial to the study, as it fulfilled one of the specific objectives, which required their information on the teaching and learning of these subjects and the outcomes of this process, which in turn led to students' performance. The teachers were interviewed either in their classrooms or in the staffroom during break or lunchtime, as they often had tight schedules. These venues also allowed them to easily refer to their lesson plans, student work, or teaching materials during the interview. This led to richer, more evidence-based responses. The teachers were not native English speakers, but rather second language speakers, like their students.

The schools were purposively selected because they are typical rural secondary schools in Chirumanzu District, which represent resource-constrained educational settings and produced almost the same results in the English language subject at O-level. The researchers met key figures from the secondary schools where fieldwork was to be conducted to explain the purpose of their study, how they planned to conduct the research, and the participants involved in the study. Consent was also sought from the teachers who were participating in this study. The researchers ensured respect for the rights to privacy and protection from physical and psychological harm of the respondents involved in the study. The researchers ensured that each respondent understood the purpose of the study. The respondents were provided with clear and sufficient background information to inform their decision about participating in the study. The researchers explained to the research participants that the study was voluntary and that they would be assured of confidentiality, with no attempt to identify individuals. They also explained that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time if they wished to do so and that nothing would happen to them.

It was only after their consent was obtained that the researchers began scheduling interview sessions with the respondents. Pseudonyms were used during data collection for anonymity and confidentiality. Considering the subjects of the research, who were the main sources of information, was important; therefore, ethical issues ought to be observed during fieldwork.

Data was captured by a voice recorder and through taking notes from semi-structured interviews and follow-up questions, after getting consent from the students. Semi-structured interviews and follow-up conversations were designed to elicit reflective narratives about students' experiences. These were then transcribed into English so that they could be used in this study. The study used theme analysis on qualitative data, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: Familiarisation, coding, theme creation, review, definition and reporting.



Coding was both inductive (based on facts) and deductive (using transformative learning and experience frameworks). NVivo software helped organise and categorise textual material.

Results and Discussion

Translanguaging as a pedagogical approach

During the study, teachers were asked about translanguaging as a pedagogical approach. According to the findings, translanguaging offers a promising strategy for English language instruction in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. By embracing students' linguistic repertoire, teachers can create inclusive and meaningful learning environments. According to García (2009), translanguaging recognises and values students' multilingual competence. Teachers acknowledge the students' home languages and encourage their use in the classroom. This approach fosters a positive language identity and enhances students' confidence in expressing themselves. Two participants admitted that:

You find that some pupils simply do not raise their hands because they lack confidence in expressing themselves in English, but if you allow them to use both languages, you discover that they actually have excellent ideas (Teacher 5).

I allow my learners to use their home languages when they are discussing or trying to understand new concepts. It helps them feel valued and confident, and once they understand the concepts in their own language, they can then express their ideas more effectively in English (Teacher 8).

These excerpts illustrate that translanguaging fosters confidence in learners and helps them express themselves more effectively than when they attempt to do so solely in English. In response, teachers and learners in this study relied heavily on code-switching and code-mixing as coping mechanisms. This aligns with Kadege's (2006) assertion that code-switching does not indicate teacher incompetence but rather serves as a useful strategy for clarifying meaning and supporting comprehension in multilingual classrooms. Translanguaging promotes the creation of language-rich environments in classrooms. Teachers can display multilingual resources, such as charts, posters, and books, that incorporate students' home languages alongside English. This supports vocabulary development, comprehension and critical thinking skills. In the same vein, the participants admitted that:

In my class, I usually display one chart in different languages or two charts with the same information in different languages so learners understand what will be displayed (Teacher 4).

I keep a small classroom library with storybooks written in both English and the learners' home languages. They enjoy reading in their language first and then trying the same story in English. It really improves their comprehension (Teacher 2).

The excerpts show that learners were able to access meaning more effectively when materials were provided in both English and their home languages. This supports Cummins' (2007) theory of linguistic interdependence, which suggests that knowledge and skills acquired in one language can be transferred to another. By allowing learners to use their existing linguistic resources, teachers scaffold understanding and enable students to engage more meaningfully with English texts. Another benefit of translanguaging identified in this study is vocabulary development. Teachers reported that learners were able to compare words and phrases across languages, thereby expanding their vocabulary and better understanding abstract terms. This resonates with Lewis, Jones and Baker (2012), who argue that translanguaging enhances metalinguistic awareness by allowing students to reflect on



similarities and differences between languages. Such comparative analysis not only enriches learners' vocabulary but also deepens their overall language competence.

Other participants said that translanguaging encourages collaborative learning among students. Group work and peer interactions enable students to leverage their diverse linguistic resources to complete tasks and solve problems. This cooperative approach fosters a sense of community and collective learning (Van Ryzin, Roseth & McClure, 2020). Likewise, some of the participants indicated that:

At times, it is not easy for learners to raise their hands when the teacher asks a question because, at times, they do not know how to respond correctly in English, but when they discuss in groups, they can even share ideas using both languages, and this helps them complete tasks without many challenges (Teacher 3).

When I put learners into groups and allow them to use their home languages while discussing tasks, they participate more actively and help each other understand the content better (Teacher 4).

In the above quotations, teachers reported that during group discussions, learners are able to air their views freely in their home languages and express themselves and complete tasks with greater ease. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which emphasises the role of social interaction and collaborative dialogue in cognitive development. Translanguaging, therefore, creates opportunities for peer-to-peer scaffolding and shared knowledge construction. The study also found that translanguaging encourages the integration of different languages in the classroom. Teachers can strategically incorporate students' home languages into English lessons to clarify concepts, provide examples, and scaffold learning. This allows students to make connections between languages, facilitating a deeper understanding of English (Canagarajah, 2011). Similarly, Teachers 6 and 1 remarked the following, respectively:

When I explain some concepts to them in both the vernacular and English, I realise that learners' understanding is enhanced. This enables them to better understand the subject under discussion, making it easier for them to answer questions (Teacher 6).

Sometimes I explain difficult English terms using the learners' home languages. When they understand the meaning in their own language first, it becomes easier for them to grasp and remember the English word. It really helps them connect what they already know to what they are learning (Teacher 1).

Despite challenges, the study found that translanguaging offers a promising pedagogical alternative for rural Zimbabwean schools. Both teachers reported that translanguaging facilitates comprehension, vocabulary development and confidence. These findings echo García's (2009) work, which positions translanguaging as a powerful tool for making learning accessible by drawing on students' entire linguistic repertoires.

In the context of Zimbabwean rural secondary schools, where linguistic diversity is prevalent, translanguaging provides a pedagogical approach that acknowledges students' diverse linguistic repertoires and enhances their English language learning. By valuing multilingualism, integrating languages, creating language-rich environments, promoting collaborative learning, and investing in teacher professional development, teaching English can become more inclusive, meaningful, and effective in rural secondary schools.

Challenges with learning English first additional language in Zimbabwe

Rural secondary school learners often encounter several challenges in learning English first additional language, which can impact their language acquisition and overall educational experience. According to the study respondents, some learners have limited



exposure to the English language. They have fewer opportunities to practice and engage with the English language outside of the classroom, which hinders their language proficiency (Thuan, 2023). Some of the teachers said,

Most learners speak English in the classroom during lesson time. That is why they view English as the language of the classroom. As soon as the teacher leaves the classroom, they revert to their mother tongue, so the time to practice the English language is very limited (Teacher 3).

Most of our learners come from homes where English is hardly spoken. Once they leave the school premises, they hardly hear or use the language until the next school day. This lack of exposure makes it very difficult for them to develop confidence and fluency in English (Teacher 5).

The above excerpts show that learners in rural areas are not fully equipped to deal with all the complex requirements of English in the classroom. Incidentally, English is their second, third, or possibly fourth language, and it has been a language of teaching and learning with little relevance in a rural setting, where English is hardly spoken at home or in the school playground. This lack of exposure results in a lack of English language proficiency, affecting their academic performance. This aligns with Brock-Utne (2010), who argues that learners in multilingual African contexts often struggle to master English because it is rarely spoken in their homes and communities. The lack of authentic exposure to English undermines learners' fluency and proficiency, making it difficult for them to meet the demands of a curriculum that is heavily dependent on English.

Another challenge reported by participants is inadequate learning materials. Rural schools often face resource constraints, including a lack of up-to-date textbooks, reference materials, and multimedia resources for English language instruction at the secondary school level. According to Mitrulescu and Negoescu (2024), the scarcity of appropriate learning materials can limit learners' exposure to authentic English language, thereby impeding their language development. The participants shared, thus:

The textbooks that we have are very few. At times, ten or more people share a textbook, which causes some pupils to struggle to complete the assigned exercises. Some may even decide not to write the work (Teacher 2).

We don't have enough up-to-date English books or reading materials here. Most textbooks are outdated and not very engaging, so learners rarely have the opportunity to interact with authentic English. This limits their vocabulary and makes it hard for them to improve their language skills (Teacher 4).

Learners in rural schools are typically from impoverished families who cannot afford to acquire books for themselves, and they rely on those supplied at school. They claimed that most of the books in rural school libraries were outdated. Newspapers, which they may occasionally purchase from shops or butchers, are usually used to make fires, not for reading. In fact, they do not consider them as part of the reading materials. This is consistent with Chimhenga's (2016) findings, which noted that rural Zimbabwean schools face chronic shortages of teaching and learning resources, limiting the effectiveness of English language instruction. Without access to relevant and updated materials, learners lack opportunities to engage with authentic English texts, which are crucial for developing reading, writing, and comprehension skills (Cummins, 2000).

Another challenge hindering English learning in rural areas is the limited availability of teacher training and support. Rural schools usually struggle to attract and retain experienced English language secondary school teachers. Experienced teachers shun these



schools due to infrastructural concerns such as transport and electricity (Richard, Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Research by Sibanda (2018) supports this, noting that rural schools in Zimbabwe often fail to attract and retain qualified English teachers due to limited incentives, poor working conditions, and geographical isolation. Others avoid them because of economic concerns; for example, although it is considered misconduct to conduct extra lessons, teachers in towns are doing so to earn extra income and alleviate economic blues. In rural areas, many parents are unwilling to pay for extra lessons because they do not value their importance or cannot afford to pay due to unemployment, resulting in a lack of steady income.

Teachers in these settings usually have limited access to professional development opportunities and support systems, unlike their counterparts in urban areas, which impacts their ability to effectively teach English first additional language. Two participants, 1 and 6, had this to say, respectively:

The main challenge is the lack of training and refresher courses. We want to upgrade our skills, but the opportunities are very few in rural areas. Without support, it's hard to keep up with new methods of teaching English as a second language (Teacher 1).

Out here, we rarely receive workshops or training on new methods of teaching English. Most of the time, we are just using the same old approaches we learned during college, while teachers in towns are always being updated. It makes it difficult for us to keep up and truly support our learners (Teacher 6).

New methodologies, such as translanguaging, may assist teachers in teaching and learning English, but they have not been incorporated into teacher-training institutions. Teachers would then need workshops to help them use these methodologies in teaching English at the secondary school level. Without adequate training, teachers may rely on outdated or teacher-centred approaches, which may not effectively support English language learning.

Limited access to technology is another challenge students face in learning English. Rural schools often have limited access to technology and the internet, which can restrict learners' exposure to online English language resources, interactive learning platforms, and digital language tools that could enhance their language skills (Vanbuel, 2023). The following two responses help cement the above, thus:

We have very few computers in the lab, which were donated by the late President Robert Mugabe, but some are outdated and incompatible with today's demands. There are also issues with electricity and the internet. We experience power outages almost daily and have no backup system, so we cannot use the computers. When electricity is there, internet connectivity is also very slow, and you spend the whole period trying to open one document (Teacher 8).

We don't have computers or reliable internet here, so our learners can't access online English materials or interactive programmes like those used in town schools. They miss out on many digital resources that could help them improve their English (Teacher 7).

These excerpts illustrate that limited connectivity in rural areas hinders effective language learning. Power outages, internet connectivity issues, and inadequate facilities disrupt teaching and learning, reducing learners' opportunities to practice and engage with English. In today's digital world, such constraints leave rural learners at a severe disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts (Thembane, 2024). Technology could provide access to



a wealth of English-language materials and interactive platforms, but infrastructural deficits make this almost unattainable in rural Zimbabwe.

In summary, the challenges faced by rural learners in acquiring English, ranging from limited exposure and resources to inadequate teacher training and technological constraints, highlight systemic inequalities in the education system. However, the findings of this study show that translanguaging can help mitigate these challenges by promoting comprehension, vocabulary development, confidence and cultural validation. Translanguaging should not be seen merely as a compensatory practice but as a transformative pedagogical approach that makes learning more inclusive and meaningful in multilingual contexts. By embracing translanguaging and addressing systemic challenges, Zimbabwean rural schools can create more equitable opportunities for English language learning.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that translanguaging plays a crucial role in English learning in rural areas. Despite limited infrastructure and resources, translanguaging evolved as a low-cost, practical and effective pedagogical technique for bridging learning gaps and increasing student involvement and understanding in multilingual rural classrooms. Translanguaging recognises and values students' multilingual competence. Teachers acknowledge the students' home languages and encourage their use in the classroom. This approach fosters a positive language identity and enhances students' confidence in expressing themselves more effectively than when they attempt to do so solely in English.

Much as teachers may want to include translanguaging in their lessons, most lack the knowledge to do so because the college curriculum did not equip them to do so. On the other hand, professional development programmes to enhance teacher training and support workshops and mentoring opportunities to equip teachers with effective instructional techniques for incorporating translanguaging in their lessons are rarely implemented. This is because there is inadequate funding for the workshops and a lack of motivation among the teachers and facilitators as well.

There is very little or no integration of technology in rural areas to overcome resource limitations and support learners' translanguaging through digital multilingual apps. Some learners do not have access to computers because there are very few, they are outdated, or they lack internet connectivity. Therefore, they have no access to available digital applications that can assist them in learning English using their mother tongue.

Recommendation

The study makes the following recommendations:

Pedagogical Recommendations (For Classroom Teachers)

Integration of bilingual texts and dictionaries into classrooms to assist learners in their mother tongue and English. The design of translanguaging-based collaborative learning activities and the use of local cultural materials (e.g., folktales and drama), real-life examples and local experiences in their lessons to enhance student motivation and engagement. Language learning can be more dynamic and enjoyable by incorporating project-based learning and narrative exercises.

Recognising and appreciating learners' native languages in the classroom helps them improve their English language skills. Encouraging code-switching, code-mixing, and code-borrowing between learners' native languages and English might improve their understanding



and language creation. Teachers can incorporate students' native languages into classroom activities and use their linguistic repertoires to improve English language development.

Institutional and Professional Development Recommendations (For Schools and Teacher Education Institutions)

Establishment of regular professional development workshops and refresher courses in English language teaching approaches and strategies for teachers in rural schools, and the creation of local teacher learning communities or professional networks to collaboratively design translanguaging-based lesson plans and partnerships with nearby universities to support teacher capacity building. Providing more resources, including digital resources, to teachers and learners might help them use translanguaging as an effective teaching strategy. Mentoring opportunities can help teachers create successful instructional strategies and materials. Collaboration between schools and nearby universities and colleges can provide support and capacity-building for teachers.

Policy and Infrastructure Recommendations (For the Ministry of Education and Government Agencies)

At the policy level, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should consider formally integrating translanguaging into the curriculum as a recognised teaching strategy. This would not only improve learning outcomes but also align with Zimbabwe's multilingual language-in-education policy. Provision of multilingual-friendly instructional resources rather than exclusively monolingual English textbooks. These include bilingual dictionaries and digital multilingual language applications like Google Translate, Duolingo, and ChatGPT, among others, which can assist learners in both English and their mother tongue. Establishing well-equipped libraries and digital learning applications can help improve access to educational materials. Gradual improvement of essential infrastructure, such as improving classroom facilities, ensuring a dependable power supply, and enhancing internet connectivity, is critical. The government should prioritise infrastructure and technology investment to provide favourable learning environments for English language instruction in rural schools.

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