

History teaching in South Africa could be vastly improved - if language skills were added to the mix

By Nhlanhla Mpofo

4 Oct 2023

In recent years there's been [growing recognition](#) among education experts that [integrating content and language learning](#) is key to promoting comprehensive academic achievement.



Source: [Unsplash](#)

This is particularly relevant in multilingual education systems where English serves as the primary medium of instruction.

So, in 2013, South Africa's Department of Basic Education, which is responsible for primary and secondary education, set out to enhance academic performance through a strategy called [English Across the Curriculum](#). This approach involves integrating language skills in content subjects such as history. Language skills include listening and speaking; reading and viewing; writing and presenting; and language structures and conventions.

The initiative was designed to guide teachers in public schools who lacked prior experience in merging content subjects like history, [physical sciences](#) and mathematics with language learning. It was a compulsory tool to reinforce the use of English as a language of learning and teaching and a way to address language barriers to academic success in primary and high schools.

Four years later, the department released [a report](#) revealing that many content teachers were not using the strategy effectively. As an expert in curriculum studies, I wanted to know what was holding teachers back. I conducted [qualitative research](#) that focused on grade 8 social science educators teaching history at four schools in the Eastern Cape province.

My findings suggest that most educators were not intentionally choosing or setting out to integrate English language learning skills with history content. Two of the four schools did not have formal, explicit policies to use English Across the Curriculum.

But, intriguingly, I found that the history teachers at the schools without such policies still worked to impart language skills to their pupils. They were able to do so for several reasons.

Firstly, they adjusted their teaching to encompass both language and subject skills, driven by their extensive understanding of how their subject is taught and the support needed for learners to develop historical competence. Second, they were personally committed to imparting language skills. And third, they were proficient in the English language themselves.

This underscores the idea that effective teaching practices transcend mere policy implementation. They also require educators to be well-equipped with both skills to teach in any context to ensure that their pupils learn with comprehension as opposed to just implementing policies.

What teachers told me

I had the opportunity to interview 15 teachers who teach Grade 8 history at seven schools. Grade 8 is the entry-level to South Africa's secondary school; the average age of pupils at this level is 14 or 15.

In my initial discussions with these 15 teachers, 11 indicated that, while they were aware of the English Across the Curriculum approach, they were not using it.

I ultimately interviewed four teachers from four schools. All were intentionally choosing to integrate content and language teaching. Two did so because of their schools' policies. They taught at what are often referred to as [former model C schools](#) (reserved for white students before 1994 and fairly well-resourced).

The other two schools were in highly populated and resource-constrained communities and did not have English Across the Curriculum policies. However, the teachers I interviewed took the initiative and used language teaching as an academic support mechanism for their learners.

All four teachers primarily employed activities such as vocabulary development, clustering exercises, and the use of writing frames that encompassed sentences and paragraphs. Clustering activities allowed the learners to use mind maps and word associations as a way of encouraging them to organise historical ideas into interconnected categories and narratives. They said these exercises helped to make learning more engaging and interactive. One of the teachers told me:

“ For Grade 8s, these activities help organise their thoughts and language structures. It allows for free-writing and peer feedback. When they have ideas and points on what to write, they complete their tasks satisfactorily. I am saying satisfactorily because for most of them, the language is a struggle. You know sometimes, I wish they could just write in isiXhosa or Afrikaans.

”

The teachers also told me they knew it was important to impart language skills because some of their grade 8 learners,

emerging from the COVID pandemic, had not fully developed their vocabulary and writing abilities in primary school. One of the teachers explained that:

“ *Instead of just teaching history, I also work on helping them with their language skills. History needs learners that can read with comprehension, so it would be pointless to teach them without providing reading strategies. While this approach may be time-consuming, it is helpful to my learners.* ”

Training is key

My findings suggest that, while English Across the Curriculum policies are undoubtedly important, educators' individual commitment and adaptability, coupled with their expertise in subject-specific language, play an important role in achieving successful integration of language and content instruction.

There are several ways that my findings could be integrated into training. The Department of Basic Education requires in-service teachers to pursue continuous professional development. The coordinators of that development must prioritise English as a medium of instruction alongside content teaching in secondary schools.

Trainee teachers, meanwhile, should be equipped with the pedagogical skills needed to seamlessly integrate content and language teaching in the secondary school curriculum.

My findings also emphasise the crucial role that schools play in nurturing a sense of agency among teachers. The two teachers whose schools did not have a policy were still empowered to teach in a manner that fostered effective learning. They used their knowledge about their schools' communities and their individual students to facilitate language development.

But policies are still important: a structured approach to integrating content and language teaching indicates a collaborative effort between a school's administration and its educators.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nhlanhla Mpofu, Chair- Curriculum Studies, Stellenbosch University

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>