



Building bridges: Content-teacher and language-teacher collaboration in South African high schools

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ABSTRACT

In non-native English-speaking contexts where learners are instructed in a language different from their mother tongues, governments develop strategies to improve their proficiency in that language. Thus, this study examined how content and language integration was carried out in educational settings where English is used as the medium of instruction, focusing on multilingual South African high schools as the research sites to understand this phenomenon. I explored the collaborative planning and co-teaching opportunities that the content and language teachers created to work together to design instruction that met the needs of diverse learners. The study included six participants grouped into three pairs, consisting of English teachers and content teachers from Economics and Life Sciences. The six participants were selected based on their self-reports indicating that they were actively integrating content and language learning in both lesson planning and teaching practices. Data were collected through lesson plan analysis, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal three key themes: collaboration alignment for content and language learning; lesson planning collaboration; and collaboration focused on developing learning materials. The study suggests moving away from deficit-oriented approaches in content and language teaching and adopting an asset-based orientation that recognises and values learners' strengths.

Keywords: collaborative teaching; English across the curriculum; English as a medium of instruction; South Africa

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the collaborative planning and co-teaching opportunities that content and language teachers developed to design instruction tailored to the needs of diverse learners. In educational settings where English serves as the language of

learning and teaching (LoLT), the significance of collaborative instructional methodologies is unequivocal (Pham & Unaldi, 2022; Rui et al., 2024). These approaches facilitate the concurrent development of language proficiency and content comprehension (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2021a). Watts-Taffe (2022), Mahan (2022) and Vygotsky (1978) underscore the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development, advocating for collaborative learning environments as fertile grounds for both language acquisition and knowledge construction. Thus, within English-mediated educational contexts, embracing collaborative instructional practices becomes not merely advantageous but imperative in nurturing students' linguistic and academic growth (Mahan, 2022; Pham & Unaldi, 2022). This collaborative approach is an important factor in enhancing language acquisition and academic performance among English language learners (ELLs) (Heritage et al., 2020; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). By integrating language instruction with content learning, educators can provide ELLs with meaningful opportunities to engage with academic material while simultaneously honing their language skills especially in multilingual contexts such as South Africa (Banegas, 2020; Bower et al., 2020; Martínez Agudo, 2020).

Many previous studies have explored collaborative instructional practices in educational contexts, focusing particularly on their implementation in multilingual and superdiverse language environments (Darvin et al., 2020; Pham & Unaldi, 2022; Rui et al., 2024). However, a notable gap in the literature lies in the lack of detailed descriptions regarding the implementation of these practices, especially in regions of the global South where initial teacher education (ITE) curricula often fail to adequately prepare in-service teachers for such tasks (Lughmani et al., 2016; Pérez Cañado, 2018). This gap underscores the need for further exploration of the practical strategies used by educators in integrating content and language in multilingual and superdiverse settings (Darvin et al., 2020).

South Africa, with its diverse linguistic landscape and educational challenges, provides an insightful context for examining how educators navigate the intersection of content instruction and language development (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2021b). By examining the collaborative efforts within these subject areas, the study aimed to shed light on effective strategies for promoting both linguistic and academic growth for ELLs in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Arnándiz et al., 2022). Specifically, the study examined the collaboration between an English teacher and an Economics teacher (School A); an English teacher and an Economics teacher (School B); and an English teacher and a Life Science teacher (School C) for Grade 10 classes. In South Africa, Grade 10 learners typically fall within the age range of 16 to 17 years and belong to the final phase of secondary education, known as Further Education and Training (FET). This phase encompasses Grades 10 to 12, with Grade 12 being crucial as it determines students' eligibility for admission to tertiary institutions based on their academic performance.

While the previous studies have provided valuable insights into the collaboration between content and language teachers in South Africa, there are still notable gaps in the existing research. Specifically, the present study identifies a lack of detailed exploration into the specific strategies and practices that effectively enhance collaboration between these educators. Furthermore, there is insufficient understanding of how such collaboration impacts the academic and linguistic outcomes of English Language Learners (ELLs) within the unique context of South African high schools. The current study aims to address these gaps by providing a deeper analysis of collaborative approaches and their implications for improving

both language proficiency and content mastery among learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase.

1.2 English across the curriculum

South Africa, known for its rich linguistic diversity, is experiencing a notable rise in migration, contributing to the emergence of a superdiverse language landscape (Mohr, 2020). This dynamic shift underscores the complex composition of ELLs in South African classrooms, characterised by diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, ethnicities and demographic factors (Seethal, 2023; Vandeyar & Catalano, 2020). Despite recommendations for multilingual pedagogy across various educational phases (Maseko & Mkhize, 2021), the norm is the adoption of English as the primary medium of instruction in teaching and learning contexts (Bower et al., 2020; Coetzee-Van Rooy & Botha, 2024). Given that many ELLs in South Africa come from diverse language backgrounds and have varying proficiencies, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) has adopted a strategic approach to integrate English language skills development with content learning (DBE, 2014, 2015). This strategic approach is referred to as English Across the Curriculum (EAC) (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2021a). In various educational contexts, the strategic approach of integrating content and language skills development is recognised under different names. Some refer to it as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), highlighting the seamless integration of language instruction with content learning (DBE, 2017). Others use terms like Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) or Cross-Curricular Language Learning (CCLL) to emphasise the interdisciplinary nature of language acquisition throughout various subject areas (San Isidro, 2021). Regardless of the terminology employed, the underlying principle remains consistent: the fusion of language and content instruction to promote comprehensive academic development and linguistic proficiency among learners (DBE, 2017; Mpofu, 2023). These diverse labels reflect the global recognition of the significance of incorporating language learning across the curriculum to enhance educational outcomes and equip learners with essential communication skills for success in an increasingly interconnected world (DBE, 2015). In South Africa, a tailored adaptation of this integrated approach has emerged, rebranded as English across the Curriculum (EAC) (DBE, 2014). Given that English serves as the primary LoLT in most South African schools, this strategy aims to enhance the use of English both as a subject, particularly in English language classes, and as the medium of instruction across all subjects (DBE, 2017). Despite its focus on English, the South African EAC mirrors the fundamental principles and essence of CLI, LAC and CCLL.

1.2. Research questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the collaborative strategies utilized by content and language teachers in multilingual contexts where English is the medium of instruction. To achieve this, the study addresses the following research question: How do collaborative planning and co-teaching practices among content and language teachers in multilingual South African high schools facilitate the integration of content and language learning?

1.3. Significance of the study

In theory, the EAC strategy in South Africa has garnered significant support from researchers and educators alike. There exists a wealth of overarching wisdom and have been extensive discussions advocating for the adoption of this strategy (DBE, 2017; Mpofu & Maphalala

2021a). However, a crucial aspect missing from these discussions is the implementation of the EAC approach in ITE programmes. Recent studies by Mpofu and Maphalala (2021a) and Mncube et al. (2021) have highlighted this gap, emphasising the need to explicitly integrate EAC principles into ITE curricula. For instance, Mpofu and Maphalala (2021a) conducted a study which revealed that most ITE curricula incorporate content and language learning in a fragmented manner. Typically, this entails a mere five-credit module, often scheduled for just one hour per week, aimed at equipping pre-service teachers (PSTs) with the basics of understanding and implementing the EAC strategy. This challenge is not unique to South Africa: researchers such as Pérez Cañado (2018), focused on Argentina and Spain, and Tachaiyaphum et al. (2023) in Thailand, have observed similar struggles among PSTs in implementing CLIL. Specifically, PSTs encountered difficulties in using subject-specific language that was comprehensible to their learners, highlighting a widespread need for more robust and comprehensive teacher preparation programmes to address the complexities of implementing language-integrated instructional approaches.

Moreover, in South Africa there is a dearth of descriptions regarding how content teachers who underwent their ITE prior to 2015, before the EAC strategy gained prominence, are collaborating with English language teachers to implement the EAC approach. Many of these educators did not receive formal exposure to EAC during their initial training. Instead, their understanding of EAC has evolved through continuous professional development opportunities. Research conducted by Rui et al. (2024), Pham and Unaldi (2022) and Mpofu and Maphalala (2021b) has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with collaborative efforts between content and language teachers within the EAC/CLIL framework. However, despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the literature regarding clear descriptions of the actual collaborative practices found in English medium of instruction contexts.

1.4 Theoretical framing: Teacher collaboration as a sociocultural and reflective practice

Teacher collaboration refers to the intentional and coordinated efforts of educators to work together, share ideas, knowledge and resources, and engage in joint planning and decision-making processes (De Jong et al., 2022). It involves teachers collaborating with their colleagues, both within and across subject areas, to improve teaching practices, enhance student learning outcomes and create a supportive and effective school environment (Nápoles, 2024; Voogt et al., 2016). Teacher collaboration can take various forms: firstly, collaborative planning where teachers come together to design curriculum, develop lesson plans and align instructional strategies to meet the needs of their learners (Jonker et al., 2019), as well as co-teaching, where educators with complementary expertise or specialised knowledge work together in the same classroom to deliver instruction (Nápoles, 2024). This allows the educators to share responsibilities, differentiate instruction and support diverse learners (Hackett et al., 2021). Through data analysis and assessment forms, teachers can also collaborate to analyse learner data, identify trends and patterns, and make data-informed decisions to improve instruction (de Boer & Leontjev, 2020; Sebald et al., 2023).

Another form of collaboration is when teachers work together to observe and provide constructive feedback to their colleagues, focusing on instructional practices, classroom management and student engagement (Nguyen & Ng, 2020). This process promotes

professional growth and reflection (De Jong et al., 2022). Lastly, through collaboration on interdisciplinary projects, teachers from different subject areas cooperate in designing and implementing interdisciplinary projects or units of study that integrate multiple disciplines and promote connections between subject areas (Sebald et al., 2023). This study aimed to explore the collaboration between content and language teachers, an area that has received limited attention in the South African context (see Mpofu & Maphalala, 2021a). Furthermore, based on the findings of the DBE (2017), which indicated that the implementation and usage of the EAC strategy in South African high schools was inconsistent, this study sought to provide a comprehensive report on all the forms of collaboration observed during data collection.

Teacher collaboration in the context of content teacher and English language teacher collaboration in South African high schools can be approached as a theoretical framework that draws upon insights from Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism and Farrell's (2020) reflective practices. Teacher collaboration emphasises the social nature of learning and the importance of collaborative interactions in the educational process (Nguyen & Ng, 2020). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs through social interactions with more knowledgeable individuals such as teachers and peers. In the context of content and English language teacher collaboration, Vygotsky's (1978) ideas suggest that when teachers collaborate, they can provide learners with a rich learning environment that integrates subject-specific content and language development. By working together, content and English language teachers can create opportunities for learners to engage in collaborative activities, discussions and projects that promote deeper understanding and critical thinking (Heritage et al., 2020). Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is relevant to teacher collaborations. The ZPD refers to the gap between a learner's current level of ability and their potential level of development with guidance and support (Lambright, 2023). Through collaboration, content and English language teachers can identify and scaffold learners' learning needs within the ZPD. By jointly planning and delivering lessons, the teachers in this study provided differentiated instruction, offered timely feedback and facilitated peer interactions that supported students' cognitive and linguistic growth (Mahan, 2022).

Farrell's (2020) reflective practices complement Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism by emphasising the importance of ongoing critical reflection and self-assessment in teaching. Reflective practices involve teachers examining their beliefs, assumptions and instructional strategies to improve their teaching effectiveness (Bush & Grotjohann, 2020). In the context of content and English language teacher collaboration, reflective practices encourage teachers to engage in dialogue, share their experiences and critically analyse their instructional approaches (Banegas & del Pozo Beamud, 2022). By reflecting together, teachers can identify areas for improvement, generate innovative ideas and develop strategies to address challenges related to content and language integration (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019). This reflective dialogue can occur during collaborative planning sessions, post-lesson discussions, or even through professional learning communities (Farrell, 2020; Xu & Zammit, 2020).

By embracing this theoretical worldview in this study, I explored the collaborative planning and co-teaching opportunities that the content and language teachers created to work together to design instruction that met the needs of diverse learners (Hackett et al., 2021; Nápoles, 2024). I assumed that by jointly planning lessons, teachers could share their expertise, identify language demands in content materials and develop strategies to support language learners

(Banegas & del Pozo Beamud, 2022; Heritage et al., 2020). In terms, of co-teaching, I captured the models that the teachers used such as team teaching and parallel teaching, which enabled them to deliver instruction together, providing additional support, scaffolding and differentiated instruction for students with varying language proficiency levels (Hackett et al., 2021). Additionally, I was interested in the collaboration between content and language teachers and how it extended to the assessment and feedback processes. By aligning their assessment strategies, teachers can ensure that language proficiency is assessed authentically within the context of content learning (de Boer & Leontjev, 2020). I was interested in documenting how they developed rubrics or criteria that explicitly recognised language development alongside content understanding (de Boer & Leontjev, 2020). I also focused on collaborative feedback discussions that further support students in understanding and addressing their language-related strengths and weaknesses within the content area (Bush & Grotjohann, 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2022). Building on the selected theoretical insights, I conducted joint interviews with the teacher pairs to document how their collaborations contributed to their ongoing professional development. I assumed that through collaborative planning, reflective discussions and the sharing of best practices, content and language teachers could enhance their professional growth (De Jong et al., 2022; Farrell, 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2022).

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design within the interpretivist tradition, employing an exploratory case study approach. This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, capturing the complexity and contextual nuances of collaboration and shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of the teachers involved (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The exploratory nature of the case study design allowed me to gather rich and detailed data through various qualitative methods such as interviews, observations and document analysis (Swedberg, 2020).

2.2. Participants

The research site for this study was three high schools located in one of the provinces of South Africa. The choice of this specific province was influenced by factors such as its multilingual educational settings and the availability of language and content in-service teachers engaged in collaboration. The participants for this study were chosen using purposive sampling, a non-random sampling technique commonly employed in qualitative research. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question (Nieuwenhuis, 2019).

In this case, the primary criterion for participant selection was that they had engaged in collaboration prior to data collection. The second criterion was that the participants had to be teaching a Grade 10 class, which is the first grade in the FET phase. I assumed that at this introductory grade, the teachers were more intentional with integrating content and language skills and thus had a greater probability of using the EAC strategy. These criteria ensured that the participants had firsthand experience with collaborative practices, which was crucial for the study's focus on collaboration in content and language integration. Given the criteria, a total of

six participants were chosen to form three pairs. The study sample consisted of the following pairings: an English teacher (Thabo) and an Economics teacher (Cebisa) from School A, an English teacher (Aphiwe) and an Economics teacher (Babalwa) from School B, and an English teacher (Anathi) and a Life Science teacher (Wilhem) from School C. Notably, all participants had completed four years as professional teachers, having graduated in 2020, which meant that they had been exposed to the EAC strategy in their initial teacher preparation programmes. The collaborations had been in existence from 2022 for School A and C and from 2021 for School B.

The collaboration observed in these schools and among the pairs was not organised or initiated specifically for the purpose of this study. Instead, it emerged organically within the school contexts. This natural occurrence of collaboration adds ecological validity to the study, as it reflects the actual collaborative practices taking place in these educational settings (Rogers & Cheung, 2021). Through an examination of these authentic collaborations, the study aimed to uncover valuable insights into the genuine collaborative endeavours within multilingual classrooms, focusing on exploring the contextual realities experienced by the participants, rather than being influenced solely by the study objectives.

2.3. Data generation tools

To ensure crystallisation, three data generation methods were used to collect data in this study, namely, lesson plan analysis (see Appendix A), classroom observations (see Appendix B) and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C). Naeem et al. (2024) describe crystallisation as a process of data analysis and interpretation that involves multiple iterations and perspectives to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon. Initially, I analysed the participants' lesson plans and discovered that in the province where the data were collected, the provincial department of education provided a standard lesson plan for teachers. All the pairs recognised the importance of the lesson plans for their collaborative efforts and adapted the lesson plans supplied for their purpose. In the analysis of the lesson plans, I focused on aspects such as the lesson outcomes, activities, assessment and reflection and how these related to content and language learning.

While conducting the analysis of the lesson plans, I simultaneously interviewed each pair, aiming to probe them to explain their contextual factors and the pedagogical reasoning that influenced their planning decisions. Pedagogical reasoning refers to the thought processes and decision-making involved in planning and implementing teaching strategies and activities (Kavanagh et al., 2020). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were covered. Each pair of teachers was interviewed separately to facilitate open discussion about their collaborative planning process. The interviews took place in a comfortable setting to encourage candid responses, lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes each. During the interviews, I asked targeted questions designed to elicit insights into the contextual factors that influenced their lesson planning, as well as the pedagogical reasoning behind their decisions. This approach allowed the participants to provide detailed explanations of their experiences and strategies. Audio recordings were made with the participants' consent, and notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and additional observations.

The data collected from these interviews were analysed alongside the lesson plans to provide a

comprehensive understanding of the interplay between collaboration and instructional design. I examined the lesson plans for terms 3 and 4 of 2023, as these were considered the most comprehensive representations of the year's instructional strategies, reflecting the insights and adaptations made during terms 1 and 2. This analysis aimed to identify trends in pedagogical approaches, themes of collaboration, and strategies employed to address the diverse needs of learners. To ensure a systematic review, I utilized the lesson plan schedule (see Appendix A) to document the data generated from this analysis. This schedule provided a structured framework for categorising key elements of each lesson plan, including learning objectives, instructional activities, assessment methods, and the integration of content and language learning. By focusing on the latter part of the academic year, I aimed to capture the impact of earlier reflections and adjustments on the teachers' collaborative planning processes, thereby gaining insights into the effectiveness of their instructional design. This detailed examination not only highlighted the evolution of teaching practices but also illuminated the collaborative dynamics between content and language teachers throughout the planning stages.

Following the lesson plan analysis, I conducted two class observations for each pair, resulting in a total of 12 observations (two observations per pair). The duration of each observation varied based on the school timetable, with School A and School C having 45-minute observations and School B having 50-minute observations. During these observations, I focused on the teaching activities in both content and language lessons that fostered the planned collaboration. I also documented instances where the lesson planned was not followed. The data from these observations were documented using the researcher's diary and audio recordings, since video recordings were not ethically cleared for the study. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each pair to further explore and clarify my observations from the lesson plan analysis and classroom observations. The interview lasted between 45 and 68 minutes for each pair. During these interviews, I sought clarity on the pedagogical activities used by the participants and probed deeper into the reflective practices that facilitated their planning for content and language learning. The raw data from the semi-structured interviews were recorded using audio recorders and transcribed for analysis.

2.4. Data analysis

I used a thematic framework to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a method that involves identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data to gain insights and understanding (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This type of analysis can be divided into two approaches, deductive and inductive analysis. Since the study aimed to examine collaboration in content and language integration in multilingual settings and did not start with predefined themes, an inductive thematic analysis was employed (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This approach allowed for the emergence of themes directly from the data, without imposing preconceived notions or categories (Naeem et al., 2024). To conduct the analysis, I followed the analysis steps prescribed by Xu and Zammit (2020). These steps provided a systematic framework for organising and interpreting the data. I employed a systematic approach that involved data coding, categorization, and theme development to analyse the collected information. First, I coded the data by labelling significant segments to highlight key concepts and patterns. This coding process allowed me to organise the data into manageable categories. Next, I categorized these codes into broader themes that captured the underlying ideas and recurring patterns within the data. This thematic analysis enabled me to gain deeper insights into the collaborative practices of the teachers and how these practices influenced their

instructional planning. Ultimately, this structured approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the integration of content and language learning.

3.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The findings of this study reveal three key themes that characterise the types of collaboration in content and language teaching. These themes are Philosophical alignment for content and language learning collaboration; Lesson planning collaboration, and Collaboration focused on developing learning and teaching materials.

3.1.1 Theme 1: Philosophical alignment for content and language learning collaboration

During the lesson planning review discussion, all the participants emphasised the necessity of aligning their teaching philosophies and ideologies for effective collaboration in content and language learning. Thabo, an English teacher at School A, acknowledged this by stating, “This collaboration works because Cebisa and I know the importance of language in content learning” (School A, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 1). Cebisa, an Economics teacher in the same school, added, “I have tried in the past to establish a close teaching relationship between English and Economics for Grade 10 without success. It was when Thabo joined the school that we could establish it because we align in how we view the importance of language in high school learning” (School A, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 1). At School C, Wilhem, the Life Science teacher, emphasised the need for a shared vision among educators, stating, “You have to have the same vision for your learners, or this collaboration will not work” (School C, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 1). Anathi, in support of Willem's statement, noted, “The team-teaching works for us as we are committed to it. I think our teaching beliefs just align” (School C, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 1).

The duo at School B, Aphiwe, the English teacher, and Babalwa, the Economics teacher, highlighted the significance of a philosophical collaboration centred around social justice. Aphiwe expressed their perspective by stating, “We teach at a township school with limited resources, and this collaboration is our contribution to ensuring that learners excel in both English and Economics” (School B, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 2). Meanwhile, Babalwa emphasised her stance, saying, “for me, it's a no-brainer. It's either I provide language support for my learners, or I fall into the trap of blaming the learners for their circumstances. I choose to be a solution through this collaboration” (School B, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 1).

Under this theme, the pairs reiterated that effective collaboration in content and language learning requires the alignment of teaching philosophies and ideologies. When educators share a common understanding of the importance of language in content learning, have a shared vision for their learners and approach collaboration as a solution to address educational challenges, they create a collaborative environment that enhances learning outcomes and promotes their overall academic development. This alignment facilitates collaboration, enables the integration of language skills into various subjects and provides a platform for teachers to work together towards common goals. These collaborative partnerships were held together by the need to improve disciplinary academic performance, as well as ensure pedagogical access for all learners as part of the educators' ideological social justice beliefs. In the context of this study, social justice in language and content teaching involves recognising and addressing the

inequities and disparities that exist within educational contexts. The educators in this study emphasised creating an inclusive and empowering learning environment that enables all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances, to succeed academically and personally.

3.1.2 Theme 2: Lesson planning collaboration

All the pairs emphasised the importance of integrating content and language learning in their lesson planning. In School A, Thabo and Cebisa held bi-monthly meetings to discuss and agree on the lesson objectives, activities and reading materials. According to Thabo, “we meet once during a two-week cycle to agree on the objectives, activities, and the reading material we will use” (School A, Lesson planning review discussion transcript, p. 3). After observing Cebisa’s class, she remarked, “you saw that I had a lot of during reading activities, and the learners completed the comprehension questions easily as they already studied the text in English” (School A, interview transcript, p. 5). In School B, Aphiwe and Babalwa noted that they did not make assumptions about the language proficiency of their learners in understanding Economics concepts. Babalwa explained, “we give the learners a short diagnostic test to check for their understanding of the language skills they will require to grasp the concepts being taught” (School B, interview transcript, p. 10). Similar sentiments were shared by Anathi and Wilhem in School C, who also highlighted the importance of planning around the learners’ language needs. Anathi stated, “it’s a continuous process of trying to plan our objectives and activities to align with the learners’ needs. This takes time to plan, but the implementation is easy” (School C, interview transcript, p. 10).

Although all the pairs of educators collaborated on lesson planning for content and language teaching, it appeared that their focus was more on remedial measures rather than on providing a truly educational experience. While some instances of their planning seemed to have a social justice orientation, it was problematic that their approach was deficit-oriented and had a monoglossic orientation. Based on the interviews and class observations, the participants acknowledged both implicitly and explicitly that their Grade 10 learners were deficient in their language skills and in need of improvement while not acknowledging any multilingualism orientation as a resource.

Despite further probing for self-reflection, the participants did not seem to acknowledge that their collaboration was rooted in a deficit orientation that centred on the teacher rather than promoting self-directed learning for the benefit of the learners. This observation may support the notion that many South African teachers prioritise teaching for examination purposes rather than creating an environment that fosters genuine learning, as they are faced with “many ... competing priorities” (Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020, p. 7). The collaborative efforts of these six teachers, therefore, seem to be primarily aimed at securing examination success rather than nurturing a holistic learning experience for the learners.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Collaboration focused on developing learning and teaching material

The participants also expressed their collaboration in developing learning and teaching materials to integrate content and language learning. For instance, in School C, Wilhem revealed, “we must plan especially with finding Life Sciences text to be used in English. The text we chose for the reading lessons you observed is not the same but was related” (School C, interview transcript, p. 12). Anathi added, “the textbook used in the school does not align with

the EAC strategy, we must use reading texts that help us collaborate” (School C, interview transcript, p. 12). The collaboration focused on identifying reading materials was also emphasised by the other pairs in School A and B. Aphiwe and Babalwa in School A explained that they used the same texts for listening, speaking, and reading comprehension lessons.

Babalwa noted, “we use the same text for our lessons. Whether it’s a listening and speaking lesson or reading and viewing lesson, Aphiwe introduces the text in English, and I reinforce the skills in the Economics class” (School B, interview transcript, p. 11). Additionally, Aphiwe explained, “I support the learners with reading strategies to comprehend the concepts. For example, in the lesson you observed on the law of demand, learners were listening to an audio text on the concept. In the Economics class, Babalwa teaches reading and viewing lessons based on the text to reinforce concepts” (School A, interview transcript, p. 11). Furthermore, both Aphiwe and Babalwa formulated the same lesson objectives to achieve the following content and language objectives: (i) list and discuss the factors that determine demand after listening and reading a comprehension text, and (ii) differentiate between changes in quantity demanded and changes in demand using appropriate vocabulary (taken from the lesson plan for Aphiwe and Babalwa).

In School A, Thabo and Cebisa focused more on the language structures and conventions that could make it difficult for the learners to comprehend the Economic concepts being taught. Cebisa highlighted, “we use the same text to teach. For example, as the Economics teacher, I introduce the text on contemporary economic issues in English. Thabo uses the text for reading comprehension exercises and identifies the language structures that make it difficult for the learners to comprehend the text” (School A, interview transcript, p. 9). Thabo further indicated, “the selection of the learning material for this collaboration is important as it ensures comprehension of concepts through reading as an input and writing as an output” (School A, interview transcript, p. 9). All the pairs acknowledged that this was the most challenging part of their collaboration, as it required them not to use the lesson plans provided by the provincial education office. In fact, Wilhem stated: “We feel like delinquent educators for designing English and Life Science lessons together, as the provincial education office, through their lesson plans, do not make provision for this way of teaching” (School C, interview transcript, p. 10).

The nature of collaboration among the participants in developing teaching and learning materials reflects two important aspects of these collaborative relationships in integrating content and language learning. Firstly, there is collaboration that emphasises using a similar text for learning, where Grade 10 learners read the text twice. Secondly, there is a focus on South African language skills, including listening, speaking, reading and viewing, where one educator introduces the text orally in one class and the other educator continues with teaching reading and reviewing of the text. These collaborative pedagogical efforts highlight the importance of providing learners with extensive exposure to texts containing the concepts they are learning. However, the participants noted that despite the EAC strategy being presented as critical for improving content and language learning, the lesson plans they receive from their provincial education offices do not address this need.

However, none of the pairs in this study engaged in collaborative assessment and feedback activities. Upon further probing, the participants revealed that their collaborations were still in the early stages and had yet to encompass all instructional aspects. In addition, Wilhem

explicitly stated, “we do not have the knowledge of how to include assessment and feedback in our collaboration, especially the summative. Assessing for learning activities is easier to do, but we will require support with the summative aspect” (School C, interview transcript, p. 12). Collaboration in assessment and feedback is crucial for content and language teachers, as it allows teachers to combine their expertise in both subject matter and language instruction, resulting in more comprehensive and accurate assessments of learners’ content knowledge and language proficiency. However, Liu et al. (2023) noted that assessment and feedback, although critical in learning, are the most challenging aspects of content and language collaboration.

3.2. Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into the collaborative efforts of educators in implementing the EAC strategy for content and language learning in South African education. The findings highlight the importance of collaboration alignment, lesson planning collaboration, and collaboration in developing teaching and learning materials. Like previous studies such as Nápoles (2024), De Jong et al. (2022), Voogt et al. (2016) and Sebalal (2023), the study emphasises that effective collaboration in content and language learning requires the alignment of teaching philosophies and ideologies among educators. When educators share a common understanding of the importance of language in content learning and approach collaboration as a solution to address educational challenges, they create a collaborative environment that enhances student learning outcomes and promotes student’s overall development. This alignment facilitates collaboration, enables the integration of language skills across various subjects, and provides a platform for teachers to work together towards common goals. The participants’ emphasis on social justice in language and content teaching is noteworthy. Aligned to the findings in Mpofu and Maphalala (2021a), the educators in this study recognised and aimed to address the inequities and disparities that exist within educational contexts. They strived to create an inclusive and empowering learning environment that ensures academic and personal success for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.

The literature on English language learning indicates that both content and language teachers often orient their practices from a deficient perspective (see Hibbs 2024; Chaka, 2021), lacking deeper descriptions and contextualisation. However, the present study was able to trace this deficiency back to lesson planning. In this context, the deficit-oriented approach to lesson planning emphasised remedial measures and examination-driven outcomes, which often obscured the true nature of teaching and learning. This observation raises concerns about the extent to which genuine learning experiences are being provided. It is crucial for educators to shift their focus towards nurturing a holistic learning experience that promotes self-directed learning and goes beyond examination success. The collaborative efforts in developing teaching and learning materials demonstrated the importance of extensive exposure to relevant texts and the integration of language skills in South Africa. This collaborative pedagogical approach aligns with the goals of the EAC strategy and emphasises the need to provide learners with meaningful learning opportunities.

The study revealed a significant gap between the English Across the Curriculum (EAC) strategy and the lesson plans provided by provincial education offices, underscoring the need for better alignment and support from educational policies and practices. This misalignment suggests that while policies may be designed with good intentions, their practical

implementation often lacks the necessary coherence and support to achieve intended outcomes. This issue is not unique to South Africa; similar gaps have been identified in other educational contexts. For instance, Pérez Cañado (2018) examined the situations in Argentina and Spain, highlighting how policy implementation frequently falls short of its goals, resulting in a disconnect between educational strategies and classroom practices. Likewise, Tachaiyaphum et al. (2023) investigated the educational landscape in Thailand, where policies aimed at improving teaching and learning often fail to translate effectively into practice. These studies collectively emphasise the importance of ensuring that educational policies are not only well-crafted but also effectively supported and integrated into everyday teaching practices to enhance their impact on student learning.

This study highlights the critical importance of collaboration in effectively integrating content and language learning. The findings emphasize the need for aligning collaborative practices, moving away from deficit-oriented approaches, and ensuring better alignment with the goals of the English Across the Curriculum (EAC) strategy. To enhance the effectiveness of collaborative efforts, it is essential for educators and educational stakeholders to focus on these areas. By fostering a collaborative environment that prioritises alignment, educators can create more cohesive and supportive learning experiences for students. This shift not only promotes social justice by addressing the diverse needs of all learners but also enriches the educational landscape, enabling teachers to work together to devise innovative instructional strategies. Furthermore, enhancing collaboration among content and language teachers can lead to more meaningful learning experiences, as it encourages the sharing of expertise and resources. This collaborative ethos can empower educators to better support English Language Learners (ELLs) and other diverse student populations, helping them to thrive in both academic and social contexts. Ultimately, by addressing these critical aspects, the study advocates for a transformative approach to education in South Africa that prioritizes inclusivity and equitable learning opportunities for all students.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of collaboration in integrating content and language learning within multilingual South African high schools. The findings reveal three key themes: philosophical alignment for content and language learning collaboration, lesson planning collaboration, and collaboration focused on developing teaching materials. These themes underscore the necessity for educators to share common teaching philosophies, which fosters an environment conducive to effective collaboration. The emphasis on philosophical alignment indicates that when educators understand and value the relationship between language and content learning, they can create a supportive framework that enhances student outcomes. This alignment was particularly evident in discussions among participants who recognized the importance of addressing social justice and equity in their teaching practices. By working together, they aimed to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of their students.

However, the study also identified a significant gap between the English Across the Curriculum (EAC) strategy and the lesson plans provided by provincial education offices. This misalignment suggests that while educational policies may be well-intentioned, their implementation often fails to meet the practical needs of educators and learners. The focus on

remedial measures and examination-driven outcomes highlights a prevalent deficit-oriented approach that can obscure genuine learning experiences. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on content and language integration, calling for a re-evaluation of educational practices that better accommodate the linguistic and academic needs of learners. Through collaborative planning and co-teaching, educators can create meaningful and engaging learning experiences that empower all students to succeed in their academic journeys.

4.2. Suggestions

Based on the findings, the study has the following implications: firstly, ITE institutions should prioritise fostering alignment among educators' teaching philosophies and ideologies. This alignment should focus on recognising the importance of language in content learning and approaching collaboration as a solution to address educational challenges. By creating a shared vision and understanding among educators, a collaborative environment can be fostered that enhances student learning outcomes and promotes students' overall development.

Secondly, through continuous professional development programmes, there is need for all educators to be guided to shift their focus away from deficit-oriented approaches in lesson planning. Instead of primarily focusing on remedial measures and examination-driven outcomes, educators should strive to foster genuine learning experiences. This shift requires creating an environment that promotes self-directed learning, holistic development and comprehensive learning, rather than solely prioritising examination success.

Lastly, there is a need for improved alignment and support from educational policies and practices regarding teaching and learning materials. The study highlighted a gap between the EAC strategy, and the lesson plans provided by provincial education offices. To address this, educational institutions should bridge this gap by ensuring that teaching and learning materials align with the goals of the EAC strategy. Collaboration among educators should be encouraged in the development of relevant and engaging materials that provide extensive exposure to texts and promote the integration of language skills. This alignment can enhance the effectiveness of the EAC strategy and provide meaningful learning.

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Appendix A: Lesson plan analysis guide

The following guide outlines key areas to consider when analysing lesson plans:

Lesson plan component	Guiding question	Researchers' description
Lesson plan objectives	1. Identify the stated objectives of the lesson plan. Are the objectives aligned with both language and content learning goals?	
Language and content integration	2. Examine how language skills (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, listening) are integrated into content instruction. Are explicit language-focused activities or strategies incorporated into the lesson plan?	
Collaborative planning:	3. Assess evidence of collaboration between language and content teachers during the planning process. Are there indications of joint lesson planning, shared resources, or coordinated instructional strategies?	
Assessment and feedback	4. Analyse how language and content learning are assessed in the lesson plan. Do the assessment methods capture both language proficiency and content understanding?	
Resources and materials	5. Evaluate the availability and suitability of resources and materials to support language and content integration.	
Reflection and adaptation	6. Examine whether the lesson plan encourages reflection and adaptation based on learners' language and content learning needs.	

Appendix B: Classroom observation guide

The following guide outlines key areas to consider when observing classrooms:

Lesson plan component	Guiding question	Researchers' description
Classroom environment	1. Observe the physical environment of the classroom. Is it arranged in a way that facilitates collaboration and interaction between language and content teachers?	

Instructional strategies	<p>2. Pay attention to the instructional strategies employed by the language and content teachers. Are they employing strategies that promote content and language integration?</p> <p>3. Observe whether teachers use explicit language instruction techniques such as scaffolding, modelling and providing language support during content instruction.</p>	
Language development	<p>4. Notice how language skills are addressed during the lesson. Are there opportunities for students to practise reading, writing, speaking and listening in the target language within the context of content learning?</p>	
Content learning	<p>5. Assess how content is taught and explored in the classroom. Do the language and content teachers effectively convey key concepts and facilitate students' engagement with the subject matter?</p>	
Assessment and feedback	<p>6. Note how language and content learning are assessed during the observed lesson. Are there assessment methods that capture both language proficiency and content understanding?</p>	
Student engagement and interaction	<p>7. Observe students' engagement in the lesson and their interactions with peers and teachers. Do students actively participate in language and content activities, fostering collaborative learning?</p>	
Reflection and adaptation	<p>8. Observe whether teachers reflect on the effectiveness of their collaborative practices during or after the lesson. Do they adjust them based on students' language and content learning needs?</p>	

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview question

Introduction and background information

1. Can you please tell me about your teaching experience, subject expertise and the languages you teach?

Collaboration practices

2. Could you describe how language and content teachers collaborate in planning and delivering instruction in your school?
3. How often do language and content teachers meet to discuss instructional strategies and share resources?
4. Can you provide examples of collaborative activities or initiatives that have been successful in integrating language and content instruction?

Collaborative planning

5. How do you align your instructional goals and strategies with the language/content teacher? How do you ensure that language and content outcomes are addressed simultaneously?

Instructional strategies

6. What instructional strategies do you employ to support content and language integration in your classroom?

Assessment and feedback

7. How do you assess and receive feedback language and content learning in your classroom? What assessment methods do you use to capture both language proficiency and content understanding?

Reflection

8. How do you reflect on the effectiveness of your collaborative practices? Do you adjust based on learners' needs?

Closing

9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with collaboration in content and language integration?