

NAVIGATING BUSINESS LANGUAGE: PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' LOTL PRACTICES IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The Language of Teaching and Learning (LoTL) remains a critical mediator of access to curriculum knowledge in multilingual classrooms. In Business Studies, where technical terms and abstract concepts dominate, limited proficiency in the LoTL may constrain student-teachers' ability to explain content and to position themselves confidently as teachers. This paper reports on a qualitative case study that explored how Business Studies student-teachers at the University of Johannesburg experienced language proficiency during school-based teaching practice. The study was informed by Bandura's self-efficacy theory and situated in an interpretivist paradigm. Data were generated through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with three third-year student-teachers specialising in Business Studies. The data were analysed thematically. Two research questions guided the paper: how student-teachers experience language proficiency when implementing the LoTL in multilingual classrooms, and how language proficiency shapes their self-efficacy and confidence during teaching practice. The findings show that English proficiency was viewed as necessary because Business Studies content, notes, and assessment expectations are largely delivered in English. However, English alone did not resolve the problem of learner understanding. Participants reported that learners often lost the meaning of key concepts and business terminology, which required student-teachers to simplify explanations, use learners' home languages for examples, and draw on informal translation support. The findings also reveal that confidence was not only a language issue but also a content and context issue. Participants became more confident when they understood Business Studies terminology, could ask questions in supportive spaces, and could make language choices that matched learner needs. The study concludes that teacher education should strengthen the disciplinary language of academic English and Business Studies while also preparing student-teachers to use principled multilingual strategies in classrooms.

Keywords: *Business Studies, language proficiency, LoTL, multilingual classrooms, self-efficacy.*

1. Introduction

Language proficiency is an essential aspect of education because teaching depends on language to introduce concepts, explain examples, ask questions, give feedback and assess understanding. In multilingual classrooms, this becomes more complex because the official Language of Teaching and Learning (LoTL) may not be the language through which all learners make meaning. The South African Business Studies Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) sets out subject content and assessment requirements for Grades 10-12, but the effective teaching of that content still depends on how teachers communicate concepts to learners (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2011).

Business Studies is particularly language-sensitive because learners are expected to understand content through subject-specific terms, business examples, definitions and examination phrasing. Academic language is not simply ordinary conversation; it is the language through which school knowledge is organised, explained and assessed (Schleppegrell, 2012). For student-teachers, the challenge is therefore not only to know English generally, but also to use Business Studies language clearly enough for learners who come from different linguistic backgrounds. Existing work on Business Studies has shown that language can become a barrier when learners and teachers struggle to attach meaning to the concepts used in the subject (Mudaly & Singh, 2018).

The issue is also linked to teacher preparation. Linguistically responsive teacher education argues that teachers should understand learners' linguistic resources and use them to support learning, rather than treating multilingualism solely as a problem (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). At the same time, English remains important in many South African schools and university contexts because it is used in curriculum documents, textbooks, notes, assessment practices and professional communication. This creates tension for Business Studies student-teachers: they need to strengthen their academic English while also drawing on learners' home languages as resources for understanding.

This paper focuses on the experiences of three Business Studies student-teachers at the University of Johannesburg during their initial teacher education teaching practices experiences. It does not compare student-teacher and learner perceptions because learners were not interviewed. Instead, the paper presents a small but focused case study of how student-teachers themselves made sense of language proficiency, LoTL implementation and confidence in multilingual classrooms. The contribution of the paper lies in showing how the disciplinary language, code-switching, informal translation support, and self-efficacy intersect in the early professional development of student-teachers.

The paper addresses the following refined research questions: 1. How do Business Studies student-teachers experience language proficiency when implementing the LoTL in multilingual classrooms? 2. How does language proficiency shape Business Studies student-teachers' self-efficacy and confidence during teaching practice?

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Language proficiency is strongly connected to access, participation and the quality of classroom communication. UNESCO (2003) argues that education in multilingual contexts requires careful attention to local languages and wider languages of communication. In this study, this balance is evident in participants' accounts where English was treated as necessary for Business Studies, but learners' home languages were also needed to clarify meaning when English-only explanations did not suffice.

In teacher education, academic language proficiency is particularly important because teachers are expected to model and teach the language used in school subjects. Van der Merwe (2018) shows that teacher education students require well-developed academic language proficiency to engage successfully with academic and professional tasks. For Business Studies student-teachers, this includes reading notes and textbooks, explaining definitions, marking learners' work and using the correct business terminology. Schleppegrell (2012) similarly positions academic language as central to teaching and learning because subjects are built through particular ways of using language.

The Business Studies classroom is, therefore, a useful site for examining LoTL practices. Mudaly and Singh (2018) note that language can operate as a barrier in the teaching and learning of Business Studies. This is consistent with the participants' repeated references to keywords, concepts, and terminology, as well as the difficulty of making Business Studies language meaningful to learners. The problem is not only whether a teacher speaks English, but whether the teacher can connect English, disciplinary vocabulary and learners' linguistic resources in a way that supports understanding.

The study is also framed by Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Bandura (1982) explains self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their capability to organise and perform actions required for particular tasks. In teaching practice, self-efficacy is linked to how student-teachers judge their ability to stand in front of a class, explain content, answer questions and manage classroom uncertainty. Iroegbu (2015) notes that self-efficacy influences effort, persistence, and performance, while Olivier et al. (2019) show that self-efficacy is associated with engagement and achievement. In the present study, self-efficacy is used to understand how language proficiency and content knowledge affect student-teachers' confidence and sense of professional legitimacy.

3. Research methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative approach to understand how student-teachers interpreted their experiences of language proficiency and LoTL implementation. A qualitative case study design was appropriate because the study focused on a small group of participants within a specific teacher education context (Yin, 2018). The purpose was not to generalise statistically, but to provide a detailed account of how three Business Studies student-teachers experienced language in multilingual classrooms.

The study site was the University of Johannesburg. Participants were third-year student-teachers in the Methodology and Practicum programme for Business Studies. All three participants had between one and three years of integrated learning or practical teaching experience. The participant profile is shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities.

Table 1. Participant profile.

Participant	Teaching experience	Gender	Subject specialisation
Participant A	1-3 years of integrated learning/practicals	Female	Business Studies; Economic Management Sciences; English First Additional Language
Participant B	1-3 years of integrated learning/practicals	Female	Business Studies; Economic Management Sciences; English Home Language
Participant C	1-3 years of integrated learning/practicals	Female	Business Studies; Economic Management Sciences; English First Additional Language

Data was generated through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The interview questions focused on English proficiency, LoTL practices, challenges in teaching Business Studies, code-switching, and the relationship between language proficiency and confidence. The interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences during practical teaching, including the language choices they made when learners did not understand English explanations.

Data were analysed thematically. Following the logic of thematic analysis, the interview data were read closely, recurring ideas were coded, and related codes were grouped into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were then refined to align with the two research questions. The analysis remained close to the participants' own words, and direct extracts are used in the findings to show how the interpretation was developed. Ethical care was taken by using pseudonyms and avoiding identifying details about participants or schools.

4. Research findings

Two main themes emerged from the analysis. The first concerns how participants experienced language proficiency when implementing LoTL in Business Studies classrooms. The second concerns how language proficiency, content knowledge and classroom context shaped their self-efficacy and confidence. The findings are presented as situated insights from three student-teachers rather than as claims about all Business Studies student-teachers.

4.1. Language proficiency and LoTL implementation in business studies

The first finding is that participants regarded English proficiency as necessary but not sufficient for successful Business Studies teaching in multilingual classrooms. Participant A viewed English as the common classroom language that could reduce confusion when learners came from different linguistic backgrounds: *"You need to know your English so that you should be able to explain almost everything, like 90% of your content in English, so that everyone will understand it."* (Participant A)

This response shows that English was understood as a shared LoTL for Business Studies. However, the same participant also explained that English alone was not always enough. She argued that student-teachers should also be multilingual where possible because learners' home languages can make examples and explanations easier to understand. Her own code-switching was mainly used when making examples, while she tried to keep the main content in English.

Participant B offered a more contextual view, stating that the level of English proficiency required depends on the school, the area, and learners' language backgrounds. She indicated that Business Studies notes, textbooks and departmental resources were usually encountered in English. For this reason, reading and writing in English were important for preparing notes, reading subject material and marking learner work. However, she also described a classroom in which many learners did not understand certain English concepts. In that situation, the expectation to provide notes and explanations in learners' languages became difficult because there were several languages in the class.

A key point from Participant B is that informal translation support was not presented as a formal university strategy. It appeared as an organic response to a classroom problem during teaching practice. She explained that she had to ask friends and someone who could translate so she could summarise what she wanted learners to know in a language they could understand. This shows peer translation as a survival strategy that emerged from the demands of multilingual teaching rather than as a planned part of the practicum.

The challenge became sharper when Business Studies activities were presented in English only. Participant B described using a game to teach Business Studies content, but the learners who were not from English-speaking homes did not understand the activity as expected: *"Even though the work was in the notes, I feel like they lose the meaning of certain concepts and key words."* (Participant B)

This extract highlights the disciplinary nature of the language problem. The learners had notes, but the concepts and keywords remained unclear. For Business Studies, therefore, the LoTL challenge is not

only about speaking English fluently. It also involves explaining business terminology, making examples relevant and checking whether learners have attached the correct meaning to the concepts.

Participant C also linked LoTL implementation to examples and learner understanding. She reported that she used the native language when explaining examples so that learners could understand better: *“I was explaining the examples in the native language, so that they could understand better.”* (Participant C)

Across the three interviews, the data show a pattern: English remained important for the curriculum and for Business Studies content, but participants negotiated the LoTL through code-switching, simplified explanations and informal translation when English-only explanations limited learner participation. These practices were not used to replace English completely. Instead, they were used to support meaning-making where learners’ understanding of Business Studies terms was uncertain.

4.2. Language proficiency, confidence and self-efficacy

The second finding is that language proficiency shaped student-teachers’ self-efficacy, but only in combination with content knowledge and classroom context. Participant A did not see confidence as a language matter only. She explained that knowing the content was also important because a teacher who knows the content can explain it more effectively. When asked whether language proficiency influenced confidence, she responded that it was “50/50”. This suggests that language and content knowledge worked together in her experience.

Participant A also explained that she had felt less confident when expected to explain content in English to learners who mainly spoke another language. Her preference was to teach in a school where she could code-switch when needed. This shows that confidence was linked to the freedom to make language choices that matched the classroom context. A student-teacher may know the content, but still feel less confident if the expected LoTL does not support communication with learners.

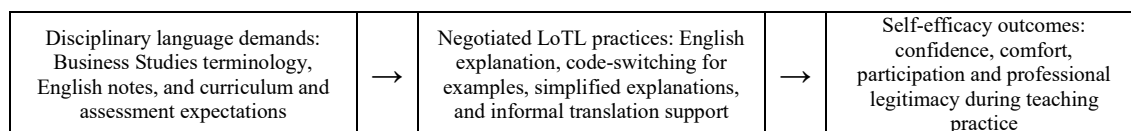
Participant B connected confidence to understanding what one is reading, saying and teaching. She stated that a teacher feels more competent when the teaching language is understood. At the same time, she described difficulty when learners asked questions in a different language or switched between English and their home language. This made it difficult for her to respond with confidence, even though she was an English Home Language speaker. Her account is important because it shows that being confident in English does not remove all LoTL challenges in a multilingual Business Studies classroom.

Participant C’s account showed the strongest connection between content, terminology and confidence. She had not done Business Studies at school and therefore experienced both content and language pressure during teaching practice. She described an incident where a mentor gave her a textbook and expected her to teach on the first day: *“I do not have any confidence in class. I just asked the guys how you are trying to explain, but honestly, I couldn’t. I was embarrassed.”* (Participant C)

This example shows how low confidence was produced by a combination of limited familiarity with the content, uncertainty about terminology, and the pressure to perform as a teacher. Participant C later explained that she needed to know the content and receive support so that she could teach comfortably. She also reported that it was easier to ask questions in smaller classes than in larger ones, suggesting that supportive spaces can help student-teachers build confidence.

Participant C further reflected on how the language of Business Studies became easier over time. She explained that first-year Business Management was difficult because of the terminology, and that she had to go back and translate many of the words. However, she became more confident as her English language skills and understanding of business terminology improved. This finding supports the view that self-efficacy can develop through repeated exposure, support and improved mastery of disciplinary language.

Figure 1. Language proficiency, LoTL implementation and self-efficacy pathway emerging from the data.



5. Discussion

The findings show that the relationship between language proficiency and Business Studies teaching is more complex than a simple English versus home language debate. Participants recognised the importance of English because the subject uses English notes, terminology, and assessment practices. This finding is consistent with the view that academic and disciplinary language are central to teaching and learning (Schleppegrell, 2012; Van der Merwe, 2018). However, participants’ experiences show that English proficiency alone does not guarantee understanding in multilingual classrooms. The data support a balanced approach. Student-teachers need strong academic English to read, write, explain, and assess

Business Studies content. They also need linguistically responsive strategies that allow learners' home languages to be used as resources when concepts and keywords lose meaning. This aligns with Lucas and Villegas's (2011) view that teacher preparation should help teachers respond to linguistic diversity. In this study, code-switching was used for examples and clarification, not as a replacement for English, suggesting that principled code-switching can bridge curriculum language and learner understanding.

The self-efficacy findings are also significant. Bandura's (1982) theory helps explain how language proficiency affects confidence, effort, and classroom participation. However, the interviews show that self-efficacy was not shaped solely by language. Content knowledge, familiarity with Business Studies terminology, mentor support, class size, and the ability to ask questions also influenced confidence. For Participant C, the problem was not only speaking English but also not knowing the content well enough to explain it confidently. For Participant B, the challenge was not low English proficiency but learners' language diversity and the difficulty of responding when learners switched languages. For Participant A, confidence depended partly on being allowed to code-switch, where English-only teaching did not work well. Figure 1 summarises the pathway that emerged from the data: student-teachers faced disciplinary language demands, negotiated the LoTL through English explanations, code-switching, simplification, and informal translation, and these practices influenced confidence and professional legitimacy.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper explored how three Business Studies student-teachers experienced language proficiency when implementing the LoTL in multilingual classrooms, and how language proficiency shaped their self-efficacy during teaching practice. The findings indicate that student-teachers need English proficiency, disciplinary language support, and practical strategies for teaching learners who do not always understand Business Studies concepts when explanations are given only in English. The study therefore argues for a balanced approach that strengthens academic English while mobilising multilingual repertoires to support learner understanding.

Three recommendations emerge. First, Business Studies methodology modules should explicitly teach academic language, including key concepts, definitions, examination phrasing, and common learner misunderstandings. Second, teaching practice mentoring should include structured feedback on LoTL decisions, especially when student-teachers use code-switching, examples, or informal translation support. Third, teacher education programmes should develop shared glossaries and bilingual exemplars for core Business Studies terms, enabling student-teachers to prepare principled multilingual resources rather than rely on last-minute translation. The study is limited by its small sample of three student-teachers and the absence of learner interviews. The findings should therefore be read as depth-based insights rather than generalizations about all Business Studies classrooms. Future research could include learners' perspectives and compare how student-teachers' language choices are experienced across different school contexts.

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