

Title: "We Do What We Can With What We Have": English Second Language Teachers' Perceptions and Localized Practices of Mandated Baseline Assessment in Eastern Cape grade 4 classes

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions and adaptive practices of English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers in rural Eastern Cape schools regarding the mandatory Department of Basic Education (DBE) baseline assessment for Grade 4 learners. The main aim was to investigate how teachers perceive the challenges of this mandated assessment and how their contextual knowledge shapes its interpretation and use for instructional planning. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected Grade 4 EFAL teachers and were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that teachers perceive the assessment as a culturally disconnected, deficit-oriented "one-size-fits-all" tool that overwhelms isiXhosa-speaking learners, merely confirming that "language is the problem." However, teachers also demonstrate significant professional agency, actively mediating the test through translanguaging, re-interpreting its data through local knowledge, and adapting instruction based on nuanced, contextual diagnoses. The conclusions indicate a primary contribution to the literature by empirically demonstrating, through the integrated lenses of Critical Policy Sociology and Sociocultural Theory, how teachers act as essential "policy actors" and "cultural mediators" who do not merely implement mandates but actively translate and reconstruct them, generating localized utility from standardized instruments. Key recommendations include co-developing context-sensitive instruments, investing in teacher assessment literacy, and formally recognizing teacher agency in policy discourse to transform assessment from a measure of disparity into a tool for educational justice.

Keywords: baseline assessment, English First Additional Language (EFAL), rural education, teacher agency, policy enactment, sociocultural theory

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, after apartheid, the education system has undergone significant reform to reverse historical inequities and to foster inclusive, quality education for all. Language-in-education policy is one of the cornerstones of this transformation. It is a key component of language-in-education

policy that makes English a primary language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from the beginning of the education process, as it has been a second or additional language for most learners by default (Mtshali & Masonto, 2025). This linguistic transition is very challenging for learners, most of whom are in rural primary schools with little or no exposure to English outside of class. This is why the initial assessment of learners' English language skills, termed a baseline assessment, is a critical element of the learning process and a key pedagogical tool. Baseline assessment is a diagnostic assessment conducted at the beginning of a teaching session to establish a student's knowledge, skills, and competencies before a new course begins. As a formative tool to inform planning, enable differentiated instruction, and tailor support by providing a clear picture of learners' starting points (Omidire et al., 2018). In principle, it should act as a responsive mechanism for equitable teaching. However, implementing baseline assessment is complicated in these contexts.

Rural teachers in many countries face a combination of assessment barriers across fields that have been shown to pose challenges. These include poor professional training in assessment literacy (Liu & Li, 2020; Muianga, 2023), lack of policy guidance (Mtshali & Masonto, 2025), resource constraints (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Khulel, 2021), and the socio-economic hardships endemic to rural environments. In South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is a national document, but teachers, especially those in the Foundation Phase, are often unable to apply it to linguistically and contextually diverse young learners (Mtshali & Masonto, 2025; Sigobodhla, 2025). This results in an assessment that is more summative and teacher-focused than formative and learner-oriented, such as in other rural ESL landscapes in Malaysia and Indonesia (Mohamed et al., 2023; Robert et al., 2024). However, the rural teaching environment does not exclude opportunities for learners and communities. Teachers' expert understanding of them and their communities is an asset (Cervone & Clouet, 2025). As more research shows, professional development is needed to transform how we assess students in rural contexts and create new practices in rural settings (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Daud et al., 2023). Based on these observations and experiences, this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this issue by exploring English teachers' living and learning experiences in rural South African primary schools. It will help in understanding not only the challenges in conducting meaningful baseline assessments for ESL learners, but also how these communities can enhance the effectiveness of assessment and, in turn, learning outcomes.

Problem Statement

Despite the importance of baseline assessment in the preparation of responsive pedagogy, implementation in rural South African primary schools for English Second Language (ESL) learners has been a challenge. The gap between national policy desires and classroom practice is large. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) provides a framework, but teachers often report that it offers no clear, practical, and context-specific guidance for assessing the various linguistic abilities of young learners (Mtshali & Masonto, 2025; Sigobodhla, 2025). In turn, such ambiguity often leads to less diagnostic assessment and a more summative, teacher-

centered approach rather than a formative, learner-centered one in other rural ESL contexts (Robert et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2023). Systemic challenges in rural settings compound this policy-practice disjuncture. Teachers are often academically unprepared for assessment literacy and lack training in assessing second-language learning in multilingual classrooms (Liu & Li, 2020; Muianga, 2023). Furthermore, they face extreme resource constraints, large class sizes, and socioeconomic challenges that affect learners' readiness and engagement (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Omidire et al., 2018; Khulel, 2021). Thus, baseline assessment is often a weak diagnostic tool, limiting teachers' ability to adjust instruction to students' particular needs. Without a deeper, contextualized understanding of teachers' perceptions of these factors, any intervention could be misaligned with the realities of rural classrooms. The research questions are: How do rural primary school ESL teachers perceive and navigate the challenges of implementing the mandatory Department of Basic Education (DBE) baseline assessment, given their learners' specific linguistic and socio-economic realities? In what ways do teachers' beliefs about assessment and their contextual knowledge shape their interpretation and use of the mandatory baseline assessment data for planning instruction in multilingual ESL classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Baseline Assessment in Rural ESL Contexts: Bridging Policy, Practice, and Perception

The implementation of baseline assessment in rural English as a Second Language (ESL) primary classrooms represents a critical nexus of language policy, pedagogical practice, and teacher cognition. This review synthesizes global and South African literature to explore three interconnected themes central to understanding this complex dynamic: the persistent challenges of assessment in resource-constrained rural contexts, the pivotal role of teacher beliefs and assessment literacy, and the specific tensions surrounding externally mandated assessment policies. A recurring finding across studies is that while baseline and formative assessments are championed as essential tools for equitable, differentiated instruction, their execution in rural ESL settings is frequently mediated—and often impeded—by a confluence of systemic, practical, and cognitive factors.

Challenges in Rural ESL Assessment: A Convergence of Constraints

A wealth of research illustrates the distinct and often significant challenges faced by teachers of young language learners in rural settings. Those are often systemic and infrastructural. Research across a variety of contexts shows the extent of resource scarcity and the lack of learning resources, including poor teaching and assessment materials, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient time to teach and assess language (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Daud et al., 2023; Khulel, 2021). In Mexico, Izquierdo et al. (2021) found that generalist teachers in rural secondary schools who taught English often faced basic professionalization and instructional challenges and used limited, ad hoc methods to teach and assess the language. The socio-economic and linguistic background of rural learners adds another layer of complexity. Students are often not exposed to the language they are expected to use and are disadvantaged in education, with economic conditions also a barrier to their good

academic performance (Omidire et al., 2018; Khulel, 2021). In South Africa, Omidire et al. (2018) found that English lessons in rural Grade 3 classes were often structured more than they were able to develop independent academic language skills, and learners could not prepare for the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) transition to English, which has been made in the past. The pedagogical gap we start from is also difficult to assess at baseline when teachers assess against a curriculum that is poorly aligned with learners' needs. The result, as noted by Mtshali and Masonto (2025) in the South African Foundation Phase, is that teachers feel ill-equipped to assess and support learners from highly diverse linguistic backgrounds with the standardized tools and expectations at their disposal.

Teacher Cognition and Assessment Literacy: The Mediating Mindset

How teachers perceive, understand, and value their assessment cognition and literacy fundamentally shapes classroom practice. In many rural ESL settings, the conceptual understanding of assessment within modern formative frameworks does not align with how teachers practice. Muianga (2023) conducted a study in Mozambique and found that secondary school English teachers were not necessarily accurate in their assessments and viewed them primarily as a mechanism for student accountability or even as an irrelevant exercise. Similarly, a study in Brazilian state schools found that teachers' views on assessment and feedback were not well aligned with national curriculum objectives, and diagnostic and formative functions were misunderstood (Mendes et al., 2022). This lack of assessment literacy is not merely theoretical; it has direct practical consequences. Liu and Li (2020) found that primary school English teachers in China often relied on intuition and teaching experience rather than formal knowledge of assessment when assessing young learners. Lack of specialized training is an “insurmountable obstacle” to professional practice. The dominance of teacher-centered assessment models in rural Malaysia and Indonesia contributes to a cognitive and practical perspective on assessment as a summative, authority-driven activity rather than a collaborative, learning-focused process (Robert et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2023). Ali and Mjenda (2024) found that in rural Tanzania, teachers used different assessment methods, and diagnostic skills were lacking in assessing individual learning, the very essence of effective formative and baseline assessment. These findings suggest that even if assessment policies are designed for learning, they cannot be implemented accurately and without taking full effect.

The Policy-Practice Interface: Mandates, Interpretation, and Agency

A crucial and under-studied aspect of rural ESL assessment is the relationship between top-down policy and grassroots classroom implementation. In many schools, assessment policies (such as baseline assessment) are designed in advance but implemented locally. The South African CAPS policy is one example. There has been a long-standing "policy-practice gap" in teacher training that teachers perceive as lacking the granular, practical guidance needed to tailor instruction to their multilingual classrooms (Mtshali & Masonto, 2025). These baseline assessments can be less meaningful if they are not perceived as relevant to the learning environment, or if teachers have

little to no inclination to adjust their teaching style based on their results. Rural teachers' experiences with the mandates are nuanced. However, research shows that targeted professional development can greatly empower teachers. Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) found that for rural teachers in the USA, completing college-level ESL courses was strongly correlated with learning the competencies that should be taught to English language learners. This suggests that support structures can help bridge the policy-practice divide. On the other hand, research also suggests that teachers are resilient and have a sense of agency. Cervone and Clouet (2025) documented that, in rural areas, some teachers developed a self-study course to become certified to work with multilingual learners, without pressure from the system. However, they also noted a "continuing disconnect" between "official policy and curricula and the actual needs of students." This tension is central to the South African case of a DBE-mandated baseline assessment. The literature raises important questions: How do teachers interpret data from a standardized, imposed assessment, given their deep contextual knowledge of learners' socio-linguistic circumstances? Does the mandate foster a compliance-based exercise? Or can it be used as an incentive for reflection and instructional change? The work of Daud et al. (2023) in rural Indonesia offers a nuanced perspective on this issue: teachers did a good job conducting assessments. They had positive impressions of them, but they also faced time constraints and procedural complexity. This illustrates how policy-based assessment reform can be pursued yet remain at odds with daily realities.

The literature shows that effective baseline assessment in rural ESL contexts is undermined by several external barriers (e.g., resource constraints, learner diversity), internal cognitive factors (e.g., assessment literacy, beliefs), and the complex interactions of top-down policies. The South African context, with its long history of educational inequality, multilingual landscape, and CAPS policy framework, is representative of these challenges worldwide. However, there is an enormous gap in empirical knowledge of teachers' daily experiences with mandatory, nationally administered baseline assessments. Most studies consider teacher-made or generic assessments. Less is known about how teachers perceive, act on, and use data from assessments they are required to administer but may not have designed. For future research, this interface should also be explored to examine how policy mandates are translated, subverted, adapted, or misunderstood in the rural ESL classroom, and what conditions would enable these assessments to fulfill the diagnostic and formative purposes for which they were intended. Understanding this process is essential for moving from assessment as bureaucratic compliance to assessment as a genuine tool for educational justice in underserved communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on a unified theoretical approach that integrates Critical Policy Sociology (CPS) and Sociocultural Theory (SCT). This dual lens is also a strong basis for exploring the interplay between the mandatory DBE baseline assessment (a macro-level policy artifact) and its micro-level implementation in rural ESL classrooms, and how this is embedded in specific social and material contexts. First, Critical Policy Sociology (Ball 1993, 2015) is necessary to interrogate

the top-down assessment mandate. CPS does not view policy as a linear process of implementation but a cycle of text creation, impact, and implementation. The DBE baseline assessment is a normative policy paper. However, CPS argues that this text does not simply dictate practice; it gets into existing power relations, resources, and professional culture. In resource-starved rural schools, often characterized by the material and socio-economic challenges in the literature (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Omidire et al., 2018), policy implementation is invariably a matter of translation, negotiation, and creative resistance. Teachers are not passive implementers but active “policy actors” who interpret the mandate through their own beliefs, experiences, and contexts (Muianga, 2023; Cervone & Clouet, 2025). This framework is directly related to the research on how teachers perceive and navigate a compulsory policy instrument in their daily lives.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), particularly mediated action, is also important; it offers insight into what happens in the classroom and how the assessment process unfolds. In this way, the baseline assessment tool is not neutral; it is a cultural artifact that mediates teacher cognition and student learning. Its use is based on teacher assessment literacy (Liu & Li, 2020) and on the teacher’s beliefs about language learning and assessment. Furthermore, SCT states that all cognitive functions of a teacher, such as diagnostic skills, are social and shaped by the wider cultural and institutional context—the very “community of practice” of a rural school. The assessment act is thus a socially engaged practice. It is influenced by the zone of proximal development (the potential of a student to learn and act on data) and the teachers (the capacity to learn and act upon data and how they do so if they are supported by professional training (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016).

This framework integrates CPS and SCT for a holistic analysis. CPS is the macro-to-meso lens that focuses on how a policy is enacted and interpreted in the classroom, and SCT is the meso-to-micro lens that examines how such a policy artifact is used in classroom social interaction. Together, they demonstrate how a universal national mandate manifests at the local level, and how institutional structures, resources, and teachers’ agency, knowledge, and beliefs can influence the validity and effectiveness of a national assessment as a tool for rural ESL learners.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This qualitative study investigates the nuanced, context-specific perspectives of teachers on the implementation of the mandatory DBE baseline assessment in rural Eastern Cape schools. Qualitative inquiry is a way of delving into the lived experiences, beliefs, and contexts that shape how policy is applied in practice, especially in a socio-linguistic environment like the Eastern Cape, where isiXhosa is the predominant home language. This is the kind of research that can provide rich, interpretive data to help you understand the lived reality of people often overlooked by standardized assessment tools.

Research Design

This study used a case study design, in which “case” refers to the implementation of the mandatory baseline assessment for rural ESL primary schools in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. This design is effective as it enables an in-depth investigation of a modern-day real-world phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2018). It will allow exploration of how teachers, in the context of the different educational and socio-economic circumstances that define the Eastern Cape, with its history of rural neglect and linguistic diversity, respond to a top-down assessment mandate.

Research Paradigm

The study is based on interpretivist theory, which states that social reality (and policy implementation) is defined by the meanings and interpretations of those involved (Scotland, 2012). This view is consistent with teachers’ theoretical commitment to being active agents who interpret the DBE baseline assessment through their professional knowledge, beliefs, and their school and community environment in the Eastern Cape. Interpretivism allows the researcher to investigate the multiple subjective realities of how this national policy is understood and negotiated locally.

Sampling

Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected eight (8) Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers from rural primary schools in two districts in the Eastern Cape. Grade 4 is a crucial transition year in South Africa, when English becomes the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), so baseline assessment at this stage is highly relevant. Purposive sampling is used to select participants with firsthand knowledge of the issue at hand in a rural province facing resource challenges and language-in-education problems.

Data Collection

The data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes each), primarily in isiXhosa or English, depending on participants' preferences, and were recorded. This method is ideal for gaining more detailed perspectives on teachers' feelings and the rationales behind their assessments (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The semi-structured format ensured consistency across interviews and allowed exploration of new topics that may emerge in the Eastern Cape context, such as language shift, community dynamics, and local resource challenges that influence the use of baseline assessment data.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. This involved getting familiar with the data, coding, and theme development. Thematic analysis is particularly useful as it allows for inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-informed) identification of patterns. It allows the researcher to explore how teachers’ accounts reflect broader themes of policy enactment, contextual adaptation, and professional agency, while

still operating within the socio-cultural and linguistic realities of the Eastern Cape educational landscape.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical review process for this study was very rigorous. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university committee and the Eastern Cape Department of Education. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in order to understand the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and guarantees of confidentiality. All participants and schools have pseudonyms, and all digital data is well managed and kept secure. These are a few things that build trust and ethical rigor when assessing how the assessment regime is conducted in a provincial department, where teachers may be uncomfortable discussing policy implementation challenges.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Based on semi-structured interviews with eight Grade 4 EFAL teachers from rural Eastern Cape schools, three dominant, interlocking themes emerged. These themes powerfully illustrate how the mandatory DBE baseline assessment is perceived, negotiated, and enacted within specific local realities, directly addressing the research questions.

Theme 1: The Assessment as a Culturally and Linguistically Disconnected "One-Size-Fits-All" Tool

Teachers uniformly perceived the mandated baseline test as a standardized instrument ill-suited to their learners' realities. A primary critique was its failure to account for IsiXhosa as the primary linguistic and cultural framework.

Lack of Contextual Consideration: Teachers said the test content and context were alien to their learners. Teacher C stated, "The stories and the pictures... they are from another world. My children know the river, the cattle, and the spaza shop. The test shows a train station or a supermarket. They cannot link, so how can they put what they know in English about things they do not know in life?" The assessment's presupposed knowledge and the learners' lived experience are at odds.

The "Blanket Approach": Teachers have been critical of the uniform use of the test. Teacher F said, "They send the same box of papers to every school, from the city to the deepest rural area. It is a blanket that they throw on everyone, but we are not the same size or shape underneath. It does not even consider where our kids are starting from. This "blanket approach" was seen as unfair, as it ignored significant disparities in pre-existing exposure to English and access to resources.

Theme 2: Overwhelming Learners with a Deficit Diagnosis: "Language is the Problem"

The baseline assessment was consistently described as an overwhelming hurdle that primarily diagnosed a monolithic deficit: lack of English proficiency. The test's comprehensive nature, covering multiple skills at once, was seen as setting learners up for failure from the start.

The overwhelming test structure: Teachers said the assessment design was a major barrier. Teacher A said, "It is too much, too soon." On a single page, they need to read a passage, answer comprehension questions, and write a sentence. They are still struggling to sound out words, and they are already being asked to analyze? It overwhelms them. They just shut down." This echoes the thinking that the test assesses discrete skills.

Diagnosing "The Problem": The data was seen as confirming a known problem and did not provide new insights. Teacher H said of it: "What does the baseline tell me? That they cannot read. That they cannot write. I already know this. The test puts a mark on it. The problem is language. They are isiXhosa speakers; English is like a wall in front of them, and this test is just me measuring the height of that wall again." This contributes to frustration with the assessment's perceived redundancy and emphasis on summative judgment over formative diagnosis.

The "December Holiday" Effect: Some teachers discussed weak performance amid seasonal rhythms in rural districts. Teacher E said, "You are going to find that they come back in January having forgotten so much. There is no English for six weeks. Maybe only the radio. So, the baseline tests them on what they have forgotten, not on what they can learn." This illustrates how teachers use local knowledge to interpret assessment data, viewing it as a measure of opportunity loss rather than innate ability.

Theme 3: Agentive Adaptation and Localized Practice: "We Do What We Can"

Despite viewing the test as flawed, teachers did not passively administer it. They exercised professional agency, adapting the administration and, crucially, re-interpreting the data through their local knowledge to plan instruction.

Mediating the Test Experience: Teachers described softening the test's impact. Teacher D said, "I see the fear in their eyes with that big paper. So first, we talk about the pictures in isiXhosa. 'What do you see here?' We break the ice. Then we try the English words. It is not in the rules, but I must get them to try." This is a significant localized implementation of the policy, and translanguaging helps make the assessment accessible.

Data Interpretation Beyond the Score: Teachers always looked beyond raw scores. Teacher B said, "The mark says 'fail'. However, I look at where they failed. Can they not read the word, or did they not understand the question? Perhaps they cannot match words to a picture, but cannot write their own. This tells me where to start teaching, not with the whole wall but with one brick." Such is a sophisticated diagnostic approach that repurposes standardized data for localized, formative use.

Action Based on Local Diagnosis: The perceived deficits directly informed teaching priorities. Teacher G said, "The test shows visual literacy is a big problem. They cannot analyze a picture for clues. So now, in my first week, we are not just learning nouns. We are looking at pictures from old magazines and local things, and I ask, 'Who is this?' Where is this? What is happening?' We build that skill first." Here, the teacher uses the test diagnosis (inability to analyze visuals) but

replaces the decontextualized content with locally relevant materials, demonstrating a mixture of compliance and adaptation.

The results suggest a clear narrative. Teachers perceive the DBE baseline assessment as a disconnected, deficit-oriented mandate (Themes 1 & 2) that clashes with their learners' linguistic and socio-cultural realities. However, they are not passive victims of this policy. They act as active agents who critically interpret and adjust the process (Theme 3), drawing on their contextual knowledge to guide students through the test experience and use the data for local instructional purposes. Their practice is to do what we can with what we have; we negotiate the tension between a top-down "one-size-fits-all" policy and the need for children to learn from what we actually have in front of them. The assessment, therefore, is not only implemented but also locally applied and socially mediated, and its ultimate meaning and utility are shaped by the very teachers it is supposed to assess.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The report presents the three primary themes that emerged from the data, situated within the context of Critical Policy Sociology (CPS) and Sociocultural Theory (SCT). The findings reveal a sharp tension between the standardized, decontextualized DBE baseline assessment and the highly contextualized and agentic practices of rural EFAL teachers.

Theme 1: The assessment as a culturally and linguistically disconnected "one-size-fits-all" tool: policy text and contextual dissonance. In Critical Policy Sociology (Ball, 1993, 2015), the baseline assessment is a pre-conceived policy intended to impose the same standard across a variety of schools. The teachers' repeated condemnation of the test as a "one-size-fits-all" approach that does not take into account students' isiXhosa backgrounds and rural realities represents what Ball (2015) describes as a fundamental "disconnect" between policy beliefs and realities in practice. This observation is consistent with Mtshali and Masonto's (2025) finding that South African teachers seem to feel CAPS policy is not the most useful way to guide instruction in multilingual settings. The policy in this sense is not a neutral diagnostic tool but rather an instrument of cultural exclusion that "measures the height of the wall" (Teacher H) of English privilege.

The teachers' descriptions of content as "a train station or a supermarket" rather than "the river, the cattle, the spaza shop" (Teacher C) are strong illustrations of epistemic violence, namely the erasure of local knowledge in favor of urbanized cultural references. This finding is consistent with Izquierdo et al.'s (2021) research in rural Mexico, where generalist teachers faced challenges in their curriculum in relating to learners' lived experiences. Similarly, Khulel (2021) observed that Indonesian rural teachers had difficulty communicating with material that was of little relevance to learners' daily lives.

The concept of the "blanket approach" (Teacher F) echoes Sigobodhla's (2025) findings from South African Grade 6 EFAL classrooms, where teachers expressed concern about the uniform assessment method. This perception of policy imposition without context has been observed in

various countries in rural Malaysia (Robert et al., 2024) and Indonesia (Mohamed et al., 2023). The teachers' critique positions them not as passive recipients but as proactive policy actors challenging the mandate's legitimacy.

The Sociocultural dimensions of cultural disconnection. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), the cultural disconnection of the assessment has implications for learning. The assessment tool is a cultural artifact whose meaning is mediated by those who learn from the past. The alien content presented in the test is what we might call a cultural ZPD gap—the gap between what learners can do with familiar content and what they believe they can do with alien content that confuses the assessment of English ability with cultural skills.

This finding is consistent with Omidire et al. (2018), who found in rural South African Grade 3 classrooms that English lessons often failed to develop independent academic language skills, and learners were unprepared for the LoLT transition. At the assessment level, we see this cultural disconnect. Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) found similar disconnects between official curricula and multilingual learners' needs in rural US schools, and Cervone and Clouet (2025) described a “continuing disconnect” between policy and student needs among rural teachers. This global pattern suggests that cultural disconnection is not merely a South African problem but rather a global issue of tensions in educational policy.

Theme 2: Overwhelming Learners with a Deficit Diagnosis: “Language is the Problem.” The Assessment as an Overwhelming Experience. Teachers said the baseline assessment was an overwhelming hurdle that only diagnosed a single deficit: lack of English proficiency. The fact that the test “overwhelms them. They just shut down” (Teacher A) is, according to Vygotsky (1978), an artifact that lies beyond learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). When administered without scaffolding, the assessment is not, in itself, a diagnostic tool but a potentially destructive experience that confirms learners' perceived lack of ability. This is consistent with Omidire et al.'s (2018) observation that rural Grade 3 learners often lack independent academic language skills to participate in English-medium assessment.

The belief that the assessment only confirms what teachers already know, “The problem is language” (Teacher H), underscores the important omission of standardized assessments in contexts where language barriers are well-documented. This is in line with Muianga's (2023) research in Mozambique, where teachers view assessment as a means of learner accountability rather than as a diagnostic tool. This makes the assessment redundant and summative rather than formative, and is a general trend that Robert et al. (2024) and Mohamed et al. (2023) find in rural ESL contexts, where assessment is teacher-centered and summative.

The teachers' framing of the assessment as diagnosing a single “problem,” in contrast to critical policy sociology, constitutes the deficit discourse embedded in the policy text. Rather than recognizing learners' multilingual resources, the assessment portrays them as deficient. This is in line with Mendes et al. (2022) findings in Brazilian state schools, where diagnostic functions were misunderstood.

Teacher E's "December Holiday" effect is a striking example of how teachers use local knowledge to reinterpret deficit-based diagnosis. Rather than seeing poor performance as an inherent ability, teachers contextualize it in seasonal rhythms and socio-economic realities. This is a sophisticated diagnostic judgment that challenges deficit assumptions and aligns well with Sociocultural Theory's understanding of the social and contextual role of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

In this sense, this finding is consistent with Liu and Li's (2020) research on the assessment literacy of Chinese primary school teachers, which shows that teachers tend to rely on intuition rather than formal knowledge. However, the teachers in this investigation exhibited assessment literacy that, though informally developed, was well thought out and contextually relevant. Their ability to distinguish between the "December holiday" effect and actual ability challenges defies assumptions and suggests that a more nuanced interpretation is possible when teachers rely on contextual knowledge.

Theme 3: Agentive Adaptation and Localized Practice: Teachers as Policy Actors. Teachers were able to make significant use of professional capacity even in the face of criticism. From a CPS perspective, teachers were involved in policy translation (Ball, 2015): the process of translating, adapting, and sometimes taking it down. Teachers' styles of arranging tests through translation, examining failure patterns, and adapting instruction are creative responses to a strict mandate. This agency aligns with Cervone and Clouet's (2025) observation that rural teachers seek resources and build self-study strategies, and is evidence of resilience under constraints. However, this translation work is additional, unseen labor that is unfair to rural teachers. Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) report that rural teachers are often not well prepared despite their willingness to innovate.

As teachers noted in the description of the practice of "doing what we can with what we have" in the context of constrained agency, professional judgment is severely constrained. This is in line with Daud et al. (2023), who observed that Indonesian rural teachers had positive impressions of assessment despite time constraints. The agency demonstrated is both a strength and a symptom of systemic failure: teachers can salvage formative value from summative compliance, but only without institutional support.

Teacher D's use of translanguaging—"we talk about the pictures in isiXhosa first" (Teacher D) is a significant localized implementation. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective, this is scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) that creates a new, more accessible ZPD for learning English text. This turns the assessment from one-on-one performance to social interaction.

These findings challenge deficit assumptions and suggest that multilingual assessment practices are more likely to provide validity and relevance. This is consistent with Omidire et al. (2018)'s finding that translanguaging enhances English development in rural classrooms and with Mtshali and Masonto's (2025) focus on assessment strategies that take linguistic diversity into account. The practice is also consistent with Sigobodhla's (2025) work in EFAL classrooms, where teachers needed more flexible assessment strategies.

Data Interpretation and Instructional Adaptation. Teachers' sophisticated data-interpretation methods—"I look where they failed" (Teacher B)—illustrate mediated assessment, in which the artifact's output is interpreted through local knowledge and professional judgment, with standardized measures becoming localized diagnostic tools. This has been identified by Liu and Li (2020) as a gap in practice among teachers who were not trained in the formal assessment process and relied solely on intuition.

The subsequent instructional adaptation (using local magazine images to support visual analysis) illustrates culturally relevant, assessment-based instruction. Teachers use assessment diagnoses but present decontextualized content in a local context to create a new, more appealing ZPD. This is consistent with Bui et al.'s (2025) research conducted in Vietnam, in which rural teachers demonstrated a greater understanding of contextual factors affecting engagement.

The three themes unite in a coherent narrative of dissonance, agency, and mediation. Teachers regard the assessment as an economically and culturally constrained, deficit-oriented tool that inundates learners and only confirms the fact that "language is the problem." However, they also have many professional agencies: they are actively translating the test, translating it back in time with local knowledge, and adjusting instruction based on complex, localized diagnoses. This is the core of the idea: "We do what we can with what we have."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the study made the following recommendations:

Co-develop context-sensitive assessment instruments: Policymakers and assessment designers must work with rural teachers and district officials to modify baseline assessments by incorporating culturally familiar content (e.g., local contexts, visuals depicting rural life) and considering multilingual response options to provide a more accurate assessment of foundational skills without the confounding barrier posed by alien cultural references.

Revise policy documentation to provide flexible, principled guidance: The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and assessment guidelines should move from rigid, prescriptive directives to a framework that provides principles for diagnostic assessment, explicitly endorses and provides examples of adaptive administration practices, such as translanguaging for clarification, to allow teachers to manage assessments with clarity for their language context.

Mandate and fund sustained professional development in assessment literacy: The Department of Basic Education should institute compulsory, ongoing training programs focused on Assessment for Learning (AfL) in multilingual settings, moving beyond compliance and scoring skills in analyzing assessment data diagnostically, designing differentiated instruction based on baseline results, and using formative strategies such as peer and self-assessment.

Formalize and support teacher communities of practice (CoPs): Districts should establish and promote CoPs that enable rural EFAL teachers to work together to analyze baseline data, share

strategies for test administration and interpretation, and develop contextually appropriate teaching resources, thereby tapping into existing informal agency and resilience and formalizing a support network.

Recognize and value teacher agency in official policy discourse: Systemic communication in education should shift from a language of compliance and fidelity to one that acknowledges and values teacher judgment, local knowledge, and professional adaptation as vital to effective policy implementation, building trust, and supporting innovative practices in complex rural classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature and empirically demonstrates that rural EFAL teachers are key “policy actors” and “cultural mediators” who not only implement mandated assessments but also actively translate and reconstruct them within local practices. The research, which draws upon Critical Policy Sociology and Sociocultural Theory, demonstrates that teacher agency is a vital but under-researched ingredient in assessment policy in underserved settings. The findings counter deficit-driven policy expectations and highlight that real assessment reform ought to build on teachers’ contextual knowledge, rather than dismiss it, and transform assessment from a measure of disparity into a tool for educational justice.

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