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Investigating the development of academic home language proficiency skills in foundation phase classrooms (Grades R–3): Focusing on reading and writing Setswana

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Abstract

Academic home language proficiency is a cornerstone of educational success, yet its development poses notable challenges for young learners, particularly in the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3). The purpose of this study is to examine how Setswana-speaking learners in Grades R–3 acquire academic home language proficiency in reading and writing, and assessed the extent to which teachers' professional experiences support effective instruction. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research integrated a literature review with empirical data gathered through classroom observations and both individual and focus group interviews. Two Foundation Phase schools in South Africa's Bojanala District one rural and one township-based were purposively selected, each using Setswana as the medium of instruction. This paper adopts Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, which identifies five systems in the ecosystem: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. Despite constraints such as limited Setswana-language resources and overcrowded classrooms, findings indicated that teachers demonstrated strong commitment to fostering academic home language proficiency through intentional and adaptive teaching practices. This study recommends that academic literacy programmes should be designed to induct learners into the norms and practices of academic discourse and its associated tasks, while simultaneously emphasizing the acquisition of transferable skills essential for real-world contexts.

Keywords: Academic, Classrooms, Foundation, Home language, Instruction, Language, Phase, Proficiency, Reading, Writing.

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1. Introduction and Background of the Study

The South African society is a kaleidoscope of races, cultures and languages that interact in all spheres, creating a rich culture of language diversity, being an apt metaphor as the rainbow nation [1]. The historical imbalances of the past in education have created a negative impact on the new policies that have been implemented. All education policy documents since 1994 are enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the Republic of South Africa, Pretorius and Murray [2]**.** Despite policy

changes, there are still, however, considerable differences in terms of learners' socio-economic backgrounds, school infrastructure and inadequate provision of resources, poor academic results because of teacher-learner ratios, lack of parent-teacher co-operation, poor teacher qualifications, and availability of teachers, and shortages in key subjects [3].

The quality of education for Black people in South Africa prior to 1994 was the lowest in the country [4]. During the colonial and apartheid administrations, political favour was given to both English and Afrikaans [2]. The history of the South African education system can be described as having two phases [5]. The first phase is associated with education under the missionaries and colonial administrations. The second is the emergence of apartheid and the education and political system associated with power and education [6].

The nature of education in South Africa has transformed over the years. It is therefore vital to examine the developments that have taken place in the field of education [7]. Tracing such developments cannot be sufficient without issues around language proficiency [8]. Language proficiency is the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms [9]. The ability to read and write in this context has the potential to empower individuals to engage proficiently in activities and tasks. Reading is a core competency at school, and all academic achievement depends, to a greater extent, on reading literacy [10].

The development of academic Home Language (HL) proficiency skills remains a central and often contested issue in the discourse on human development and education [7]. Scholars have long grappled with understanding how teachers cultivate these skills in learners, particularly within the Foundation Phase, and how the First Language (L1) serves as a medium of instruction to support learning outcomes [8]. Theoretical perspectives in this domain vary widely, often reflecting divergent views on the roles of nature and nurture in language acquisition Department of Basic Education [11]. Govender and Hugo [1] argue that children are born without innate language abilities, acquiring linguistic competence progressively through maturation and exposure. Khanyile [12] further emphasizes that early school experiences such as reading diverse texts play a vital role in expanding learners' vocabulary and literacy capabilities.

Despite being native speakers, some learners continue to struggle with literacy development in their First Language (L1), highlighting the need for explicit instruction in reading and writing Department of Basic Education [11] and Adie, et al. [13]. Cummins [14] distinguishes between everyday spoken language and academic language used in educational contexts, underscoring the importance of targeted teaching strategies. The sociocultural environment also significantly influences language development, with researchers such as Bagwasi and Costley [15] noting that social interactions shape learners' linguistic growth.

Early childhood is a critical period for language acquisition, with the home environment serving as the primary context for development through interactions with caregivers and family members [15]. Cultural variations influence the nature of home literacy activities, with Western middle-class traditions often emphasizing storybook reading as a foundational literacy practice [14]. These early experiences contribute meaningfully to learners' first language development, although the extent and nature of their impact remain subjects of ongoing debate [8]. Research across psychology, sociology, and linguistics consistently supports the view that exposure to print materials and storytelling significantly enhances language proficiency [3, 9].

Language proficiency not only facilitates communication and meaning-making but also empowers learners to engage actively in their educational journey [1]. Mastery of the instructional language is closely linked to academic achievement [5]. Understanding the factors that foster positive language development is essential for addressing disparities in achievement among learners from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As Adie, et al. [13] note, initial differences in language skills at school entry can have lasting effects on learners' cognitive growth, literacy acquisition, and overall academic success Department of Basic Education [11].

Cummins [14] distinguishes between everyday spoken language and academic language used in formal learning environments, emphasizing the importance of targeted teaching strategies. The sociocultural context also plays a critical role in shaping language development, as noted by Malindi, et al. [9] who highlight the influence of social interactions and environmental factors. Learners who lack cognitive academic language proficiency in the medium of instruction frequently encounter challenges in achieving academic success [3, 16]. In South Africa, despite persistent concerns regarding the low academic performance of learners, the intricate relationship between language and learning has not received sufficient scholarly attention [8]. Persistent disparities in the South African education system reflect deep-rooted socioeconomic and linguistic inequalities [3, 9].

Formerly white schools continue to perform well academically, largely due to the socioeconomic advantages of their learners, who benefit from resource-rich environments and parental support [16]. Conversely, most rural and township schools remain under-resourced, characterised by inadequate teaching materials and insufficiently qualified teachers [1]. Such contexts inhibit language development and academic progress, particularly among learners whose linguistic repertoires are still emerging [5].

In recognition of this, the Department of Basic Education [5] mandates the use of learners' home languages as the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase and encourages parental involvement to enhance home language literacy [11]. Empirical evidence suggests that learners perform better academically when instruction is delivered in a language that reflects their lived experiences and cultural identities [17]. In multilingual contexts such as South Africa, continued use of the home language beyond the Foundation Phase remains essential for sustained academic development [3].

This study, conducted in the Bojanala District of the North West Province, focuses on Setswana as both the language of learning and teaching and as a subject of study. It explores how Setswana-speaking learners develop academic language proficiency in reading and writing and how teachers' professional experiences influence the quality of language instruction in the Grade R-3 classrooms of the Foundation Phase.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, which identifies five systems in the ecosystem*: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems*. This theory analyses how a child develops within the context of the social network that surrounds them. In this study Spaull [18] for a teacher to assess a learner effectively, they must be familiar with the various levels in that learner's life, as each layer contributes to the child's growth and literacy level. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, there are several layers of the environment, each of which affects how a child develops [7]. The child's growth is accelerated and guided by the interaction of factors in their developing biology, the people closest to them, and the sociocultural environment. Changes or conflicts in one layer will impact the other levels [19]. When examining a child's development, it is essential to consider not only the child and their immediate surroundings but also how those factors interact with the larger environment Smith [8]. Bronfenbrenner [19] defines an ecosystem as the active individual whose life is impacted, either directly or indirectly, by the relationships between the systems. Since these systems or settings whether direct or indirect impact an individual, that person is constantly evolving through their behaviours and responses in the ever-shifting ecosystems [19].

The Microsystem refers to the immediate environment in which an individual interacts and develops. Within this setting, learners acquire essential life skills, understand their social roles, and form their sense of identity [17]. It encompasses relationships and interactions within close contexts such as the family, school, neighbourhood, and day-care [19]. These interactions can influence a learner's development both positively and negatively; for example, parental behaviour can shape a child's attitudes and actions, while children's responses may, in turn, influence their parents [7].

The Mesosystem represents the connections between different components of a learner's microsystem [14]. It encompasses interactions such as the relationship between teachers and parents, which play a crucial role in supporting the learner's development. Effective teaching and assessment of home language proficiency require teachers to collaborate with parents to understand learners' backgrounds and linguistic needs [20].

The Exosystem refers to the broader social structures that indirectly affect the learner. Although children do not actively participate at this level, their development is influenced by factors such as parents' work schedules, community dynamics, and educational policies [13, 16]. Changes within these systems such as curriculum reforms or social challenges can shape the learner's immediate environment and opportunities for learning [19].

The Macrosystem constitutes the overarching cultural, political, and economic contexts that influence all other systems. It encompasses societal values, laws, and beliefs that shape attitudes toward education and language use [21]. In the South African context, parental optimism about the role of English in securing better career prospects often leads to early exposure to the language [1, 4]. However, parents should be encouraged to maintain the use of the home language, as strong mother-tongue proficiency supports second-language development and preserves cultural identity [3, 14].

The Chronosystem reflects the dimension of time and its influence on a child's development. It includes life transitions and environmental changes such as aging or family circumstances that affect how learners adapt to their surroundings [9]. Teachers need to consider these temporal factors when planning instruction and assessment to accommodate learners' evolving developmental needs [13].

Together, these ecological systems illustrate the complex interplay between learners, their environments, and the broader sociocultural factors that shape their academic development. For Setswana-speaking learners, language acquisition and literacy development are influenced not only by classroom practices but also by family involvement, community dynamics, and societal attitudes toward language use [1]. Understanding how these systems interact provides valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities learners encounter as they develop academic proficiency in their home language [6]. This perspective guides the present study's examination of how Setswana-speaking learners in Grades R–3 acquire academic home language skills in reading and writing, and how teachers' professional experiences support this process within the Foundation Phase.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the next section reviews relevant literature on language acquisition and instruction within multilingual education contexts. The review examines how learners acquire and develop cognitive academic language proficiency in both their home and additional languages, with particular attention to research on early literacy, teacher practices, and the role of parental involvement in supporting language learning. By synthesizing key findings from prior studies, the literature review situates the current study within broader scholarly debates on language and learning in South African classrooms.

3. Literature Review

Research across Africa consistently demonstrates the benefits of mother tongue-based education. Department of Basic Education [5] and Vygotsky [22] emphasised that home language instruction enhances cognitive development, literacy acquisition, and higher-order thinking skills. In the South African context, scholars such as Shingenge [10] and Bagwasi and Costley [15] showed that learners taught in their mother tongue in early schooling exhibit stronger conceptual understanding and improved academic performance in later years.

3.1. Academic Language

Shingenge [10] defines academic language as the language used in educational settings to acquire, construct, and communicate knowledge. It encompasses the linguistic resources learners need to access academic content in textbooks and other instructional materials [12]. While some scholars use academic language and academic vocabulary interchangeably [23]. Academic language extends beyond specialized vocabulary to include the discourse structures, grammatical forms, and cognitive demands of school communication. Cummins [14] distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) language used in everyday contexts supported by gestures and intonation and Cognitive

Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which is explicitly taught in schools and essential for understanding decontextualized, abstract concepts [6]. Academic language proficiency therefore involves listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills used for academic purposes [5]. Teachers play a critical role in supporting its development in both learners' first (L1) and second (L2) languages [3, 15].

3.2. Language Proficiency

Language proficiency refers to the ability to use a language accurately and appropriately across oral and written modes [15]. It includes receptive skills (listening and reading) and expressive skills (speaking and writing) [13]. While everyday language develops naturally through social interaction, academic proficiency requires deliberate instruction [8]. Oral proficiency varies according to communicative purpose and context, informal, concrete discussions are easier to master than cognitively demanding, abstract discourse [23]. Proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is especially critical in the Foundation Phase, as it shapes learners' ability to acquire new concepts and engage meaningfully with content [9]. Using learners' home language supports this transition and strengthens comprehension [8, 20]. Families therefore play a vital role in establishing foundational language skills that teachers continue to develop in formal education [23].

Academic language proficiency enables some to make complex meanings explicit in oral or written modalities of language. Proficiency can also vary according to the function, purpose and context of communication, Engelbrecht, et al. [20]. According to Cummins [14] language that is used in informal settings may be easier to master than language that is used in formal settings. Proficiency in reading and writing relies largely on adequate language use which, according to, Smith [8]. is the vehicle that is used to move through life. Language proficiency forms the basis of all learning and is closely related to a person's experiences and general knowledge. The situation of learners at the Foundation Phase Schools under study who do not have the language of learning poses great challenges for both teaching and learning. Cummins [14] argues that learners with a strong linguistic intelligence have the ability to perform well in the theoretical and practical usage of language. According to Duke and Cartwright [6] language proficiency among young South Africans is low.

3.3. Academic Language Proficiency

Department of Basic Education [5] defines academic language proficiency as the degree to which learners can understand and use language specific to educational contexts. This aligns with Vygotsky [22] view that academic language is tied to the metacognitive skills needed for effective learning. Studies have shown that exposure to rich home language experiences such as shared reading, play, and conversation contributes significantly to academic language development [23]. Learners lacking academic language proficiency often struggle with reading comprehension and writing [17]. Because each subject has its own specialized vocabulary, explicit teaching of academic language is necessary for success across the curriculum [5, 22]. Early acquisition of these skills in the preschool and Foundation Phase years lays the foundation for later academic success [13].

According to research, millions of people cannot read and write adequately, and in South Africa this is a major cause for concern. Illiteracy implies the inability to function in everyday life, to fill in forms, earn a living, Vygotsky [22]. Literacy outside of school signifies more than just a skill [17]. The key to improvement in literacy, especially among the economically disadvantaged, includes phonemic awareness, phonic knowledge, word recognition, spelling and vocabulary. Cummins [14] human language learning is both personal and social, and all human societies, at all times, have used oral language to communicate. Written language is an extension of human language development and is learned a little later in life. MacFarlane, et al. [17] argue that language is innate in language acquisition and development, not learned but acquired in the language community a child is born into. They also postulate that language learning, through a process of invention, is shaped.

3.4. Advantages of Academic Home Language Proficiency

Research strongly supports the use of learners' home language as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling, as it bridges the gap between home and school and affirms learners' identities [8, 12]. Learners who begin schooling in their home language demonstrate stronger conceptual understanding and perform better academically [23]. Mastery of the home language also facilitates transfer of literacy and reasoning skills to additional languages [9, 13].

Home Language (HL) instruction fosters self-esteem, cultural identity, and cognitive development [15]. It promotes creativity through songs, storytelling, and traditional games, and enhances learning in other subjects such as mathematics and science [6]. When teachers and caregivers collaborate to maintain home language use, learners develop both linguistic and cultural competence, ensuring a smoother transition to English as an additional language [2, 21].

3.5. Challenges in Teaching Academic Home Language Proficiency

Despite these benefits, many South African learners do not receive education in their home languages, which undermines their academic performance [24]. While the Language-in-Education Policy [5] promotes additive bilingualism maintaining home language while introducing an additional language implementation challenges persist. Most learners transition to English medium instruction by Grade 5 [18] even though fewer than one in ten speak English as a home language [15].

Teacher training also remains inadequate. Few tertiary institutions offer comprehensive African language literacy courses, leaving teachers underprepared to teach home language effectively [9]. Successful home language instruction thus requires systemic support, sustained policy commitment, and ongoing professional development [5, 9]. Ultimately,

providing primary education in learners' home languages fosters social inclusion, academic success, and lifelong learning [2]. The alignment of home and school languages strengthens communication, reinforces cultural identity, and forms a solid foundation for bilingual and multilingual education in South Africa [17].

The literature reviewed above highlights the central role of academic home language proficiency in shaping early literacy and cognitive development among multilingual learners. Building on these insights, the following section outlines the methodological approach used to investigate how Setswana-speaking learners in the Foundation Phase acquire and develop academic home language proficiency, and how teachers support this process through instructional practices and assessment strategies.

4. Methodology

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore how Setswana-speaking learners in the Foundation Phase develop academic home language proficiency in reading and writing, and how teachers' professional experiences influence instructional quality. The study was conducted in two primary schools located in the Bojanala District of the North West Province, South Africa. These schools were purposively selected because they serve linguistically diverse communities, making them appropriate contexts for investigating the relationship between language, teaching, and learning.

The case study approach was chosen for its descriptive, exploratory, and contextually grounded nature, allowing for a detailed examination of real-life experiences [25, 26]. In line with Creswell and Creswell [27] this design facilitated an in-depth understanding of the selected cases and provided insights into how teachers navigate language instruction within multilingual classrooms. Foundation Phase teachers were deliberately selected as participants because of their relevant experience, skills, and knowledge that could help address the study's research questions [26].

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews provided opportunities for teachers to share their perspectives and experiences on teaching academic language proficiency to Setswana-speaking learners, while classroom observations offered contextual insights into actual teaching practices. Semi-structured interviews were particularly suited to this study, as they allow for flexibility, exploration, and the elicitation of participants' nuanced views [28].

Data analysis followed the principles of qualitative thematic analysis [27]. The process involved multiple stages of engagement with the data, beginning with open coding to identify emerging patterns and progressing to axial coding, where related codes were clustered into categories. These categories were then refined into overarching themes that reflected the data's depth and complexity. The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the analysis process to ensure the trustworthiness and interpretive integrity of the findings.

5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed to safeguard the rights and dignity of participants and to maintain the integrity of the research process. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld through the use of pseudonyms, with only the researcher having access to identifiable information. Participants were fully informed about the study's aims, procedures, and potential implications. Credibility and authenticity were enhanced by employing transparent data collection procedures and using qualitative methods that accurately captured participants' lived experiences.

6. Discussion of Findings from Classroom Observations

This section presents the findings of the study, which explored how Setswana-speaking learners in Grades R–3 acquire academic home language proficiency in reading and writing, and how teachers' professional experiences influence this process within the Foundation Phase. Below are the detailed descriptive narratives of what was observed, from the research observations. They are described per participating school and teacher. The observations focused on four things namely: *School Environments; Shortage of Setswana Learning Materials; Teaching Pace; Code-Switching Practices,* the following are the results:

6.1. School Environments

The environments of both participating schools were largely unconducive to effective teaching and learning. Dilapidated buildings and poor classroom conditions negatively affected learners' morale and self-esteem, as supported by Malindi, et al. [9]; Adie, et al. [13]] and Khanyile [12]. Overcrowded classrooms further limited individual attention and learner participation. Desk arrangements in rows hindered group work, contradicting CAPS' emphasis on learner-centred instruction [5]. Overcrowding, as noted by Vygotsky [22] and Govender and Hugo [1] often results in teacher dominated lessons and poor learner performance. In contrast, smaller classes especially in the Foundation Phase promote active learning and higher achievement [10, 15, 17].

6.2. Shortage of Setswana Learning Materials

Both schools faced a serious shortage of Setswana teaching and learning materials. Classrooms lacked picture books, adequate textbooks, and even basic furniture. Contrary to the UNESCO [29] report suggesting that resource shortages stem from learner negligence, observations indicated that insufficient supply was the primary issue. The lack of materials forced teachers to skip certain topics, limiting the scope and quality of instruction [17].

Teachers relied heavily on outdated textbooks, particularly *Matlhasedi* [23] with limited integration of supplementary resources. This overreliance restricted learners' exposure to varied language input [15]. Only one classroom contained additional reading materials, underscoring the absence of library facilities and a broader reading culture. Such shortages contributed to learners' weak progress in developing academic proficiency in Setswana [10, 15].

6.3. Teaching Pace

In several classrooms, lessons were delivered too rapidly, limiting learner engagement and discouraging questions. Teachers' impatience often stifled participation, and opportunities to assess learners' prior knowledge were minimal [8]. According to Vygotsky [22] effective learning builds on existing knowledge through active learner interaction an aspect largely absents in the observed classrooms Cummins [14] warns that children whose academic proficiency in the language of instruction is weak will tend to fall behind, unless the instruction they receive enables them to comprehend the input (both written and oral) and participate in class. Khanyile [12] argues that it is important to look at both societal aspects, pedagogical, linguistic and socio-cultural functions of language when learners' educational success is under discussion.

6.4. Code-Switching Practices

Code-switching between Setswana and English was prevalent in all observed classrooms. While it can support comprehension and interaction Bagwasi and Costley [15]. Khanyile [12] in this context it appeared habitual rather than pedagogically strategic. Excessive English use during Setswana lessons limited learners' exposure to the home language, thereby restricting communicative competence.

> *For instance, all teachers in both schools used English to praise the learners, for example, Excellent one! (ya maleba tota); Very Good! (bontle thata); Are we together? (a re rotlhe) and good girl or boy (bontle mosetsana kgotsa mosimane). To confirm that the learners were listening, words such as Yes! (Ee!), Okay (Eya!) were used in both schools.*

Although useful for classroom management and encouragement, overreliance on code-switching may hinder learners' proficiency in Setswana, particularly as it is not permitted in formal assessments. Further research is needed to evaluate its effectiveness in home-language instruction contexts [15]. Overall, the classroom observations revealed that structural, material, and pedagogical constraints significantly hinder the effective teaching and learning of Setswana in the Foundation Phase. The findings highlight the need for improved learning environments, adequate resourcing, and teacher support to strengthen learners' academic home language proficiency. These insights, when viewed alongside the interview data, provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by teachers and learners and inform the recommendations discussed in the following section.

7. Recommendations and Conclusions

This study set out to explore how Setswana-speaking learners in Grades R–3 acquire academic home language proficiency in reading and writing, and how teachers' professional experiences support or constrain this process. The findings revealed that while teachers are committed to promoting literacy in the learners' home language, a range of contextual, structural, and pedagogical barriers significantly undermine these efforts. Foremost among these are overcrowded classrooms, insufficient Setswana teaching and learning materials, and limited teacher training specific to language pedagogy in the Foundation Phase. Additionally, the prevalent use of code-switching suggests that many teachers lack confidence in teaching exclusively in Setswana, which in turn reduces learners' exposure to rich home-language input.

The findings affirm that the development of academic language proficiency in early education is inseparable from the broader educational environment. Learners thrive when instruction is supported by adequate resources, effective teacher preparation, and a school culture that values and promotes indigenous languages as legitimate media of learning. Strengthening Setswana instruction is not merely a linguistic endeavour but a means of enhancing comprehension, cognitive development, and equitable participation in learning.

7.1. Recommendations

1. Improved Resource Provision: The Department of Basic Education (DBE) should prioritise the provision of adequate Setswana teaching and learning materials, including graded readers, picture books, and classroom libraries to promote reading culture from early grades [11].
2. Targeted Teacher Development: Ongoing professional development should be provided for Foundation Phase teachers, focusing on mother tongue instruction, literacy pedagogy, and strategies for integrating reading and writing skills effectively [4].
3. Smaller Class Sizes: Policy efforts should aim to reduce overcrowding in classrooms to enable teachers to give individual attention and implement learner-centred pedagogies as required by CAPS, Govender and Hugo [1].
4. Balanced Language Practices: While code-switching can be a useful pedagogical tool, teachers should be trained to use it strategically to support comprehension without diminishing the role of Setswana as the primary language of learning and teaching [21].
5. Parental and Community Engagement: Schools should strengthen collaboration with parents and caregivers to encourage literacy development at home, reinforcing the use and value of Setswana in everyday communication, [17].

6. Further Research: Future studies should investigate effective models of bilingual or multilingual instruction that can sustain home language development while supporting a gradual transition to English proficiency in later grades [2, 29].

7.2. Conclusion

The study underscores the vital role of home language instruction in laying the foundation for learners' academic success. Addressing the systemic and pedagogical challenges identified here is essential for ensuring that Setswana-speaking learners and indeed all learners in multilingual contexts receive meaningful and equitable education that builds on their linguistic and cultural strengths. Academic literacy programmes should aim to socialise learners into academic discourse and the kind of tasks required in this context to focus on the real-world skills needed by the learners. This should be done while simultaneously facilitating Second Language Acquisition [23]. There is a need to address the imbalances of languages used. There must be more equitable access to and usage of technology so that disadvantaged learners can gain the confidence and competence required to succeed globally [1].

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