

Article

Rethinking Assessment Literacy: Insights from Grade 4 EFAL Classrooms in South Africa's Vhembe Cluster

Israel Creleanor Mulaudzi ^{1,*} , Ndivhudzannyi Michael Nndwamato ¹  and Rendani Mercy Makhwathana ² 

¹ Department of Professional and Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Venda, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa

² Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Venda, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa

* Correspondence: israel.mulaudzi@univen.ac.za

Received: 8 October 2025; **Revised:** 13 November 2025; **Accepted:** 28 November 2025; **Published:** 29 May 2026

Abstract: Assessment literacy remains a critical yet underdeveloped dimension of English First Additional Language (EFAL) teaching in many rural South African schools. This study explored how Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster conceptualise and implement assessment practices within the constraints of multilingual and resource-constrained classrooms. Guided by Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, the study employed a qualitative case study design involving eight purposively selected Grade 4 EFAL teachers from four rural primary schools in Limpopo Province. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis and were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that assessment practices remain predominantly summative and compliance-driven despite policy emphasis on formative assessment. Teachers demonstrated fragmented understanding of formative assessment principles, while overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and linguistic diversity constrained effective implementation. However, participants also displayed adaptive agency through culturally responsive practices such as storytelling, peer assessment, translanguaging, and low-tech digital feedback strategies. The study argues that meaningful assessment reform in rural South Africa requires more than policy compliance; it requires sustained professional development, contextualised mentoring, multilingual assessment approaches, and equitable digital support. The article contributes to emerging debates on decolonising assessment and strengthening teacher assessment literacy within African multilingual contexts.

Keywords: Assessment Literacy; EFAL; Formative Assessment; Multilingual Education; Rural Schools; Vhembe Cluster; South Africa

1. Introduction

Language assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality and direction of teaching and learning. In multilingual education systems such as South Africa's, assessment does not merely measure learning outcomes; it determines access, progression, and the very identity of learners within the school system. English, designated as the First Additional Language (EFAL), becomes a critical tool for academic success from Grade 4, the transitional year in which the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) shifts from the home language to English. This linguistic transition, though well-intentioned, introduces deep pedagogical and assessment complexities for both learners and teachers [1]. For many rural schools, especially in Limpopo's Vhembe District, this shift signifies more than a

curriculum change; it signals the widening of linguistic and socio-economic divides.

In South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) underscores the integral relationship between teaching, learning, and assessment. Department of Basic Education (DBE) [2] positions assessment as “an ongoing, planned process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about learners' performance.” In principle, this means that assessment is expected to guide instruction, inform learner support, and provide evidence for policy accountability. However, despite the clear articulation of formative and summative assessment principles, empirical evidence suggests that teachers, particularly in rural contexts, interpret assessment primarily as a bureaucratic demand rather than as a developmental pedagogical tool [3,4].

While South Africa's challenges appear context-specific, similar tensions between policy intent and classroom practice are also evident globally. In Kenya and Ghana, teachers face comparable struggles balancing summative accountability with formative feedback due to large class sizes and limited resources. Conversely, Finland and the United Kingdom demonstrate how continuous professional support and digital feedback tools can foster assessment cultures rooted in learner autonomy. Recent comparative analyses of digital pedagogy have shown that countries with stronger technology-integration frameworks foster greater formative engagement and motivation [5,6]. Positioning the South African experience within these global trends reveals that building assessment literacy is a universal imperative for equitable learning in the digital era.

The shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, long advocated by scholars of language pedagogy, has been slow to materialise in many South African classrooms [7]. Formative assessment, which should help learners identify strengths and areas for improvement, often gives way to summative tests used primarily for reporting purposes. In many primary schools, continuous assessment tasks are treated as isolated events rather than cumulative evidence of learning progression [8]. Consequently, learners receive minimal feedback, and teachers miss opportunities to adjust instruction. The outcome is a culture of assessment compliance rather than a culture of learning engagement.

Contextual inequalities compound the challenge. Schools in the Vhembe Cluster face persistent shortages of teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to professional development. As noted by Modisaotsile, rural educators operate within environments where resource scarcity, language diversity, and socio-economic hardship intersect [9]. In such spaces, even well-designed policies encounter friction during implementation. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 report revealed that nearly 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language, a statistic that resonates most acutely in Limpopo [2]. Effective assessment practices, particularly those that provide formative feedback, are thus indispensable for reversing this literacy crisis.

Globally, assessment literacy has evolved from being a technical competence to a professional identity marker [5,7]. Teachers who understand assessment principles are more likely to design valid, fair, and learner-centred tasks. In contrast, teachers who view assessment as an external imposition tend to rely on rote-based tests that offer limited pedagogical insight. Research in Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania reveals similar trends: where assessment literacy is low, learner outcomes stagnate, and feedback loops are disrupted [10]. This underscores the trans-African relevance of examining assessment practices within local contexts, such as the Vhembe region.

The Vhembe District, situated in Limpopo Province, serves as a microcosm of the challenges faced in rural education. Schools here operate under infrastructural constraints—such as irregular electricity, poor connectivity, and insufficient teaching aids—that complicate the practical application of CAPS guidelines [11]. Teachers must therefore navigate a dual burden: delivering curriculum content in a second language while simultaneously fulfilling assessment mandates that may not reflect their realities. However, as Mavhungu and Netshandama argue, rural educators also exhibit remarkable resilience, often developing creative, context-responsive strategies to mediate between policy and practice [11]. Understanding these adaptive strategies can inform future reforms in both teacher education and curriculum support.

Theoretically, this study draws on Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which conceives learning as a socially mediated process grounded in interaction and collaboration [8]. Within this framework, assessment functions as a dynamic scaffold—providing learners with feedback that bridges the gap between what they can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance [8,12]. When applied to EFAL teaching, this perspective invites educators to use formative assessment as a dialogic tool for co-constructing meaning. However, as evidenced by Netshiombo, Raphasha, and Baloyi, such theoretical ideals are difficult to realise in under-resourced schools where

teacher workload and policy pressures suppress experimentation [13].

Another emerging dimension in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape is the integration of digital tools for assessment and evaluation. The Department of Basic Education's Integrated Continuous Assessment Framework encourages schools to leverage digital technologies for formative feedback, data management, and learner engagement [14]. However, the digital divide in rural Limpopo remains vast; limited internet access and a lack of training impede implementation [1]. These digital inequities not only limit innovation but also perpetuate systemic exclusion from the envisioned modernisation of assessment practices.

Given these contextual, theoretical, and policy intersections, the current study responds to an urgent need to rethink assessment literacy in rural South Africa [5,7]. It recognizes that assessment reform cannot succeed without understanding teachers' lived realities, their beliefs, constraints, and innovations. By centring Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster, this research bridges the gap between macro-level policy rhetoric and micro-level classroom practice. The study is not merely diagnostic; it is aspirational. It seeks to illuminate how teachers can transform assessment into a pedagogical dialogue that empowers learners, nurtures language proficiency, and revitalises the culture of feedback.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader debate on decolonising assessment in African education. Western models of evaluation, often imported wholesale, may not capture the linguistic fluidity and communal learning traditions characteristic of African classrooms. As scholars such as Tlakula and Monyai contend, authentic assessment in African contexts must embrace multilingualism, orality, and contextual validity [3]. The Vhembe experience, with its blend of indigenous languages and English, provides fertile ground for exploring such culturally responsive approaches.

Finally, the study holds practical implications for teacher training institutions, district education offices, and policymakers. Unpacking how teachers in resource-constrained schools interpret and enact assessment reveals both gaps and opportunities within the current system. Its findings can inform the design of professional-development modules, mentorship frameworks, and digital support platforms that prioritise formative, feedback-driven teaching. Ultimately, the article argues that strengthening teacher assessment literacy is foundational to improving learning outcomes, enhancing educational equity, and achieving the aspirations of South Africa's National Development Plan for quality education for all [5,7].

1.1. Research Problem

Although CAPS prescribes continuous assessment as a vehicle for learner progression, its enactment in rural EFAL classrooms is inconsistent. Teachers often struggle to balance formative intentions with the bureaucratic weight of summative reporting. Consequently, assessment becomes a compliance exercise rather than a developmental tool [4]. The problem is magnified by limited professional development and the absence of supportive mentorship structures. Understanding how teachers interpret and practise assessment in such contexts is therefore crucial to improving literacy outcomes in foundational grades.

1.2. Research Questions

What assessment practices are currently used by Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster?

How do these practices align with CAPS assessment guidelines?

What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing continuous assessment effectively?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Changing Landscape of Language Assessment in South Africa

Assessment in language education has evolved from a narrow emphasis on examination to a multidimensional process encompassing diagnosis, feedback, and learner development. In South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) seeks to harmonise these purposes by promoting both formative and summative assessment [2]. Formative assessment emphasises continuous feedback to improve learning, whereas summative assessment provides cumulative evidence for promotion and certification. In principle, the two should be complementary; however, in practice, they are often conflated, particularly in rural schools where accountability pressures prevail [3,4].

Since the 1994 democratic transition, assessment has been positioned as a tool for educational reform. Nevertheless, persistent inequality in infrastructure, training, and language proficiency continues to constrain implementation [4]. The emphasis on “assessment for learning,” introduced in the National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications and reiterated in CAPS, has struggled to translate into daily practice. Teachers frequently interpret policy directives as administrative obligations rather than pedagogical opportunities, resulting in the mechanical completion of assessment tasks without meaningful learner engagement [11].

Internationally, scholars such as Stiggins et al. argue that a transformation in classroom assessment culture requires teacher assessment literacy, the ability to design valid tasks, interpret results, and use evidence to inform instruction [5, 7]. Within EFAL contexts, this literacy becomes even more vital because language assessment is intricately linked to cultural identity, multilingualism, and socioeconomic background [15]. The challenge for South Africa, therefore, is not the absence of policy but the disconnection between policy rhetoric and classroom enactment.

2.2. Defining and Understanding Assessment Literacy

The concept of assessment literacy has been redefined over the past two decades to reflect a shift from technical proficiency to professional judgment. Stiggins et al. describe it as a comprehensive understanding of the principles and ethics of assessment, including task design, scoring, interpretation, and communication of results [7]. In the African context, assessment literacy must also address issues of multilingualism, resource inequality, and culturally appropriate measurement [5, 14].

In EFAL classrooms, assessment literacy manifests through teachers' ability to align language outcomes with communicative competence. Research by Louw et al. in Gauteng schools reveals that teachers with higher assessment literacy use varied strategies, such as oral journals, dialogue writing, and learner portfolios, to capture authentic language use [8]. In contrast, low-literacy teachers depend on repetitive tests that measure recall rather than comprehension. The implications are profound: without a clear understanding of how to assess reading, writing, speaking, and listening holistically, teachers risk perpetuating superficial learning.

Furthermore, assessment literacy is inextricably linked to pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Mulaudzi, Lambani, Klu and Nephawe note that teachers who understand both linguistic theory and assessment design are better positioned to scaffold learning in multilingual environments [1]. This integration enables teachers to utilize formative tools, such as rubrics, checklists, and peer reviews, to support learner autonomy, a practice consistent with constructivist pedagogy.

2.3. Theoretical Perspectives on Assessment

2.3.1. Constructivism and Formative Assessment

Constructivist theorists view assessment as an integral part of the learning process, rather than a post-instructional evaluation. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory positions learners as co-constructors of knowledge through social interaction [8]. Within this paradigm, assessment should reveal learners' zones of proximal development (ZPD) and provide scaffolding to move them from dependence to independence [8, 16].

Recent research applies constructivism to EFAL pedagogy in Africa. Mavhungu and Netshandama found that collaborative learning tasks, such as group reading and oral retelling, promote language comprehension and social accountability when coupled with formative feedback [16]. Similarly, Moyo et al. argue that teacher-learner dialogues during assessment sessions encourage metacognition, allowing learners to reflect on their linguistic growth [15].

Formative assessment under constructivism thus becomes a conversation rather than a verdict. It values process over product and emphasises descriptive feedback that helps learners plan the next steps in their learning journey [17]. According to Yin, effective classroom assessment is grounded in practices that provide continuous, meaningful feedback that supports learning, a principle that aligns with South Africa's emphasis on formative assessment [18].

2.3.2. Critical and Culturally Responsive Assessment

Another theoretical current shaping EFAL assessment is Critical Pedagogy, which interrogates power relations embedded in assessment systems. Traditional tests often reflect Western linguistic norms, marginalising indige-

nous epistemologies. Tlakula and Monyai call for culturally responsive assessment that validates learners' linguistic repertoires and home experiences [3]. Such assessment recognises code-switching, storytelling, and oral performance as legitimate indicators of linguistic competence, thereby aligning with the African philosophy of ubuntu.

In Vhembe's multilingual classrooms, where Tshivenda, Xitsonga, and English coexist, culturally responsive assessment allows teachers to bridge cultural knowledge with curriculum expectations [19]. This approach advances equity by valuing learners' prior knowledge and positioning language diversity as an asset rather than a deficit.

2.4. Empirical Evidence on EFAL Assessment Practices

2.4.1. The South African Context

Empirical studies consistently show that while teachers understand the terminology of formative assessment, they struggle to apply it in practice. Department of Education states that formative assessment includes class activities, weekly tests, monthly tests, and end-of-term examinations as assessment for learning and assessment of learning [20]. Modisaotsile reported similar patterns in Limpopo, where teachers relied heavily on summative tasks due to insufficient training and administrative overload [9].

Ramaila and Mphahlele highlight that teacher workload remains a structural barrier: overcrowded classrooms and extensive paperwork leave little room for reflective feedback [4]. Their findings show that teachers with more than 60 learners per class resort to mechanical marking to meet submission deadlines. Consequently, feedback loses its developmental purpose.

Moreover, the Integrated Continuous Assessment Framework aims to integrate technology to ease the workload; yet, its success is uneven [21]. Mulaudzi et al. observed that while urban schools adopted digital tools for recording marks and providing audio feedback, rural schools lacked the infrastructure to participate in these innovations [1]. The digital divide thus amplifies inequality in assessment quality.

2.4.2. The Vhembe Experience

Research specific to Limpopo's Vhembe Cluster is limited but revealing. Mavhungu and Netshandama found that local teachers use traditional tests because they are familiar and align with district moderation expectations [16]. However, such tests often measure surface knowledge rather than language performance. In multilingual classrooms, learners may comprehend content but fail to express it adequately in English, leading to an underestimation of their abilities.

Mulaudzi et al. report that some teachers are experimenting with hybrid methods, such as oral storytelling assessments and group comprehension exercises, that draw from local culture [1]. These contextually grounded innovations show promise but require systemic recognition. Without institutional support, such initiatives remain isolated pockets of excellence.

2.5. Global and Continental Perspectives

2.5.1. International Insights

Internationally, the evolution of formative assessment demonstrates diverse trajectories shaped by socio-economic and technological contexts. In Finland, formative feedback is embedded in national curriculum policy through dialogic assessment and digital portfolios, whereas the UK emphasizes accountability frameworks, such as the Ofsted inspection regime, which often generates tension between compliance and creativity [21]. In Ghana and Kenya, systemic underinvestment in teacher professional development hinders the implementation of continuous assessment, resulting in assessment for reporting rather than assessment for learning [22].

Recent global research links these trends to digital transformation. Karakose et al. (2022) argue that educational systems that embrace balanced technology use and learner well-being achieve higher engagement and deeper formative learning [5]. Excessive digital dependence without pedagogical training can impair academic achievement, underscoring the need for guided integration [5]. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, these insights emphasise that effective assessment reform requires not only policy alignment but also digital literacy and contextual adaptation. Thus, the Vhembe experience resonates with broader international struggles to reconcile technological innovation, teacher capacity, and equitable learning assessment.

2.5.2. The African Debate on Decolonising Assessment

Recent African scholarship advocates for a shift toward decolonized assessment paradigms that reflect indigenous knowledge systems and multilingual realities [23]. Conventional tests often marginalise learners who think and communicate in African languages, perpetuating what Ndebele calls “epistemic injustice [24].” Decolonised assessment advocates for oral narratives, collaborative projects, and community-based evaluation as legitimate measures of competence.

Within South Africa, this discourse intersects with the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP), which promotes additive bilingualism. When applied to assessment, additive bilingualism implies that learners should be allowed to demonstrate understanding through both English and their home language, where feasible. Such practices not only affirm identity but also improve conceptual comprehension [25]. For rural educators in Vhembe, embracing this philosophy could transform assessment from an alienating experience into a culturally affirming process.

2.6. Challenges in Implementing Effective EFAL Assessment

2.6.1. Resource Scarcity

Resource shortages remain the most cited obstacle. Teachers lack access to photocopiers, graded readers, and reliable internet connections. The absence of visual and audio materials restricts the diversity of assessment tasks, leading to over-reliance on written work [11]. These constraints undermine inclusivity for learners with varied learning styles.

2.6.2. Professional Development Gaps

Although provincial departments occasionally offer workshops, they are typically one-off events lacking follow-up or mentorship [4]. Without sustained professional learning communities, teachers revert to traditional practices. The South African Council for Educators (SACE) has recently emphasised continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) as a condition for licence renewal, but uptake in rural areas remains low.

2.6.3. Policy–Practice Mismatch

Teachers perceive CAPS as prescriptive yet vague. Its general guidelines on “formal tasks” and “continuous assessment” leave room for interpretation, often leading to confusion [3]. District moderators prioritise compliance with record books rather than formative evidence of learner growth, reinforcing summative tendencies. As one Vhembe teacher in Mulaudzi et al. observed, “You assess what the district wants, not what the learner needs [1].”

2.6.4. Language and Cultural Barriers

Assessment tools seldom accommodate multilingualism. Teachers must translate concepts mentally from English into Tshivenda or Xitsonga, then evaluate learners' responses in English again. This double translation introduces inconsistencies and cognitive overload [16]. Furthermore, Western idioms embedded in standardised reading passages, such as references to snow or suburban life, alienate rural learners [1].

2.6.5. Emerging Innovations and Promising Practices

Despite these challenges, there is growing evidence of innovation among South African teachers. The National Reading Strategy encourages the use of locally produced texts, peer tutoring, and multimodal assessments [2]. In Vhembe, some teachers utilize community storytelling sessions in which learners recount folktales in English, thereby integrating culture into their assessments [15]. Others use mobile phones to record oral reading, providing audio feedback even without stable internet access [1].

Technology-assisted formative assessment, though embryonic, holds potential for rural schools. Offline applications, such as Kolibri and SnapLearn, allow teachers to track learner progress even when there is no internet connection. When combined with teacher reflection journals, these tools foster data-driven decision-making [19]. However, their success depends on training and technical support.

Another innovation is the establishment of communities of practice (CoPs). Drawing from Wenger's model, CoPs enable teachers to share experiences and co-develop assessment instruments [17]. Pilot projects in Limpopo

have shown that peer mentoring within CoPs enhances confidence and creativity [1]. Scaling up such networks could bridge the persistent gap between theory and practice.

2.6.6. Synthesis and Conceptual Gaps

The reviewed literature converges on three critical insights:

Conceptual clarity but procedural confusion. Teachers recognise the importance of continuous assessment but lack strategies for integrating it into everyday instruction.

Structural and contextual inequities, Rural educators face systemic barriers, including resource shortages, large classes, and linguistic diversity, that hinder the implementation of best practices [26].

Despite constraints, there is untapped potential for innovation. Teachers exhibit adaptive ingenuity that could inform national models if documented and supported.

However, notable gaps persist. First, empirical studies rarely capture teachers' voices in depth; quantitative surveys often dominate the discourse, overlooking teachers' lived experiences. Second, there is minimal exploration of how social constructivism can be operationalised in rural EFAL classrooms through formative assessment. Third, research seldom links assessment literacy to digital transformation and decolonial pedagogy, a nexus that is increasingly relevant in post-pandemic education [5,27].

Addressing these gaps is imperative for designing responsive teacher-development programmes. The present study, therefore, positions itself at the intersection of policy, pedagogy, and praxis, offering a contextualised account of how Grade 4 EFAL teachers in the Vhembe Cluster interpret and enact assessment within resource-constrained realities.

2.7. Conceptual Framework Emerging from the Literature

Drawing on the synthesis above, this study conceptualises effective EFAL assessment as the dynamic interplay of three dimensions:

Pedagogical Dimension: Teachers' understanding of language learning theories and their translation into assessment design.

Institutional Dimension: School and policy structures that enable or constrain formative assessment practices.

Contextual Dimension: Socio-cultural, linguistic, and technological environments shaping teacher agency.

Vygotsky's constructivist lens connects these dimensions, positioning assessment as a mediational tool that scaffolds learning through interaction. When teachers are both assessment-literate and contextually attuned, assessment becomes transformative, serving as both a mirror and a map of learning progress.

2.8. Summary

The literature underscores that improving EFAL outcomes in rural South Africa depends less on inventing new policies and more on empowering teachers as assessment designers, interpreters, and decision-makers. By situating assessment within constructivist, culturally responsive, and decolonial frameworks, this study contributes to redefining how learning is measured and valued in African classrooms. Against this scholarly and contextual backdrop, the investigation of Grade 4 EFAL teachers' assessment practices in the Vhembe Cluster was undertaken.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the assessment practices of Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers in the Vhembe Cluster of Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and classroom realities within their natural contexts [17,25]. In the context of language assessment, teachers' practices are shaped by institutional expectations, linguistic diversity, and socio-cultural conditions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative approaches alone. The qualitative paradigm, therefore, provided an appropriate framework for examining how teachers interpret and implement assessment in resource-constrained rural classrooms.

The case study design enabled the researcher to investigate assessment literacy within a bounded educational setting comprising four rural primary schools in the Vhembe Cluster [19,25]. This design enabled the collection of rich contextual data on teachers' assessment practices, challenges, and adaptive strategies. Guided by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, the study viewed assessment as a socially mediated process shaped through interaction, feedback, and contextual realities [23]. The design further enabled triangulation by using multiple qualitative data sources, thereby strengthening the depth and credibility of the findings.

3.2. Research Setting

The study was conducted in the Vhembe Cluster, located in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The selected schools predominantly served Tshivenda- and Xitsonga-speaking communities and were classified within the lower socio-economic quintiles. These schools faced persistent challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, limited digital infrastructure, and insufficient access to continuous professional development opportunities.

The Vhembe Cluster was purposively selected because it reflects many of the broader challenges associated with EFAL teaching and assessment in rural South African schools [16]. Grade 4 represents a critical transitional phase in which English becomes the language of learning and teaching, often creating linguistic and pedagogical difficulties for both teachers and learners. The setting, therefore, provided a relevant context for examining how teachers negotiate assessment practices in multilingual, under-resourced educational environments.

3.3. Participants and Sampling Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to select eight Grade 4 EFAL teachers from four rural primary schools within the Vhembe Cluster. Purposive sampling was appropriate because it enabled the deliberate selection of information-rich participants with direct experience in implementing EFAL assessment practices [17]. The selected teachers were actively involved in Grade 4 language instruction and assessment and possessed practical familiarity with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

Two teachers were selected from each school to allow for contextual comparison across sites while maintaining analytical depth. Participants possessed teaching experience ranging from four to twenty-three years and held recognised teaching qualifications, including Bachelor of Education degrees and Postgraduate Certificates in Education. Data saturation guided the final sample size, as recurring patterns and themes emerged during later stages of data collection [17].

The study focused exclusively on Grade 4 EFAL teachers because they occupy a critical position within South Africa's language transition phase. Their experiences provided direct insight into how assessment policies are interpreted and enacted within multilingual classrooms characterised by socio-economic and infrastructural constraints.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

Data were generated through three complementary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The use of multiple methods strengthened methodological triangulation and enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.4.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all eight participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min and was conducted in English, with occasional code-switching into Tshivenda where clarification was required. The interviews explored teachers' understanding of assessment literacy, formative assessment practices, feedback strategies, and challenges encountered in implementing CAPS assessment requirements.

Open-ended questions enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences and classroom realities. Examples of interview questions included:

- "How do you implement continuous assessment in your EFAL classroom?"
- "What challenges do you experience when assessing learners?"
- "How do you provide feedback to learners during language activities?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4.2. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted to examine teachers' assessment practices within authentic teaching and learning environments. Each participant was observed during EFAL reading and writing lessons. Observations focused on formative assessment strategies, learner participation, feedback practices, classroom interaction, and assessment tools used during instruction.

The researcher adopted a non-participant observation role to minimise disruption to classroom activities. Detailed field notes were recorded during and immediately after each observation session to capture contextual information and reflective insights.

3.4.3. Document Analysis

Document analysis complemented interview and observation data by examining assessment-related materials used by teachers. Documents reviewed included lesson plans, learners' written activities, assessment tasks, mark sheets, rubrics, and feedback records. These documents provided additional evidence regarding the alignment between classroom practice and CAPS assessment expectations.

Document analysis also enabled the researcher to identify patterns in assessment frequency, feedback practices, and the types of assessment tasks commonly used within participating schools.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Creswell and Creswell's reflexive thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and document evidence were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the dataset [27]. Initial codes were generated inductively from participants' responses and classroom observations. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and themes reflecting recurring patterns across the data.

The analysis process remained iterative, moving continuously between the dataset, emerging interpretations, and the theoretical framework. Themes such as summative assessment dominance, fragmented formative understanding, contextual barriers, and innovative assessment practices emerged through this process. NVivo 14 software assisted with data organisation and coding.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee (REC/SS/2024/07). Permission to conduct the research was also granted by the Limpopo Department of Education and participating school principals.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants signed informed consent forms before data collection commenced. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms, while all electronic and printed data were securely stored in password-protected, locked facilities accessible only to the researcher.

3.7. Researcher Reflexivity

As a researcher working within the broader Limpopo educational context, reflexivity was necessary to minimise personal bias and maintain interpretive integrity. Reflective journaling was used throughout the research process to document assumptions, decisions, and emerging interpretations. Continuous self-reflection enabled the researcher to remain attentive to participants' voices and contextual realities rather than imposing preconceived interpretations on the data.

3.8. Limitations of the Methodology

The study focused on a relatively small sample of eight teachers from four rural schools; therefore, the findings are not intended for statistical generalisation. However, the qualitative case study design prioritised contextual depth and interpretive richness over numerical representation. Additionally, classroom observations may have been influenced by participants' awareness of being observed. To minimise this effect, repeated visits were con-

ducted to allow participants to become familiar with the researcher's presence.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study explored how Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers in the Vhembe Cluster conceptualise and implement assessment practices within multilingual and resource-constrained classroom environments. Data generated through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis produced five interconnected themes:

1. Dominance of Summative Assessment.
2. Fragmented Understanding of Formative Assessment.
3. Contextual and Structural Barriers.
4. Emergent Innovative Practices.
5. Professional Agency and Reflective Practice.

These themes are discussed below in relation to the study's constructivist and culturally responsive theoretical framework.

4.1. Dominance of Summative Assessment

Across all participating schools, assessment practices were predominantly summative and compliance-driven. Teachers relied heavily on written tests, spelling activities, oral reading tasks, and formal exercises primarily designed to satisfy district reporting requirements rather than support learner development.

One participant explained:

"We are told to test every two weeks because the district wants marks for the report," (Teacher B).

Classroom observations confirmed that lessons frequently revolved around worksheets and formal tasks that were marked and recorded without meaningful learner feedback. Assessment, therefore, functioned more as an administrative accountability mechanism than as a pedagogical tool for improving learning outcomes.

These findings align with studies indicating that rural teachers often equate continuous assessment with continuous testing due to policy pressure and bureaucratic reporting expectations [3,4]. From a constructivist perspective, such practices limit opportunities for scaffolding within learners' Zones of Proximal Development because assessment becomes retrospective rather than developmental [24].

Furthermore, teachers' focus on marks rather than feedback constrained learner reflection and metacognitive engagement. This reinforces concerns raised by assessment scholars that compliance-oriented assessment cultures weaken authentic assessment literacy and reduce opportunities for formative dialogue [16].

4.2. Fragmented Understanding of Formative Assessment

Although participants demonstrated awareness of formative assessment terminology, their understanding of its pedagogical purpose remained fragmented. Many teachers associated formative assessment with frequent testing and routine marking rather than viewing it as a continuous diagnostic process integrated into teaching and learning.

Teacher C remarked:

"Continuous assessment just means many tests—nobody ever checks if the child understands."

This finding illustrates a conceptual disconnect between policy rhetoric and classroom enactment. Teachers often possessed declarative knowledge of formative assessment concepts but struggled to operationalise them meaningfully within classroom practice.

The findings suggest that limited professional support and insufficient reflective training contribute to these misunderstandings. Without sustained mentorship and collaborative professional learning structures, teachers rely on procedural routines shaped by compliance cultures rather than pedagogical inquiry [1].

The study further revealed limited use of descriptive feedback. Learners rarely had opportunities to reflect on errors, revise their responses, or engage in dialogic feedback. Within multilingual classrooms, formative interaction was additionally constrained by English-dominant assessment norms that marginalised learners' home-language repertoires.

These findings support culturally responsive and decolonial perspectives, which argue that formative assessment should validate multilingual communication, oral interaction, and collaborative meaning-making [1,12]. The study, therefore, extends Vygotsky's notion of mediation by illustrating that effective formative assessment in African classrooms must integrate both linguistic and cultural responsiveness.

4.3. Contextual and Structural Barriers

Teachers consistently identified structural constraints as major obstacles to effective assessment implementation. These barriers included overcrowded classrooms, resource shortages, linguistic diversity, excessive workload, and limited digital infrastructure.

One participant explained:

"We have seventy learners and only one textbook set; I cannot give individual reading tests," (Teacher D).

Another teacher added:

"Most learners speak Tshivenda at home. When I assess in English, they just keep quiet," (Teacher C).

Observation data confirmed severe shortages of teaching materials, limited access to photocopying facilities, and inconsistent availability of graded readers and digital resources. Such limitations restricted assessment diversity and reinforced overreliance on written summative tasks.

Overcrowded classrooms intensified teacher workload and reduced opportunities for individualised feedback. Several participants reported spending extensive time marking large volumes of learner work, often delaying meaningful formative interaction.

Teacher G stated:

"It takes me a full week to mark all learners; by then, we move to another topic."

Linguistic diversity further complicated assessment implementation. Teachers frequently translated instructions from English into Tshivenda and Xitsonga, yet were still required to assess learners exclusively in English. This created inconsistencies in learner comprehension and assessment interpretation.

Digital integration also emerged as a structural challenge. Although some teachers attempted to incorporate mobile technologies and audio-based feedback, weak connectivity and limited digital infrastructure constrained implementation.

Teacher A noted:

"I tried using WhatsApp voice notes for feedback, but network problems wasted our time."

These findings confirm that assessment literacy cannot be separated from broader socio-economic and infrastructural realities shaping rural schooling [21]. From a constructivist perspective, such constraints weaken the social and material tools necessary for mediated learning processes.

4.4. Emergent Innovative Practices

Despite systemic constraints, participants demonstrated considerable adaptive creativity through context-responsive assessment strategies. Teachers employed culturally grounded and collaborative approaches to enhance learner participation and engagement.

One participant shared:

"Sometimes I use storytelling in English and Tshivenda to see if they follow the plot," (Teacher E).

Teachers incorporated storytelling, dramatisation, oral retelling, peer interaction, and bilingual mediation into assessment activities. These practices enabled learners to engage with assessment tasks using familiar cultural experiences and linguistic resources.

Observation data indicated higher learner participation during culturally contextualised activities compared to conventional written exercises. Such practices align with Ubuntu translanguaging approaches that position multilingualism as a pedagogical resource rather than a deficit [12].

Some participants also experimented with peer and group assessment practices. Learners exchanged books during writing activities to collaboratively review spelling, sentence construction, and comprehension. Teachers viewed this approach as useful for promoting learner responsibility while reducing marking pressure.

Low-tech digital innovation continued to emerge in several classrooms. A small number of participants used mobile phones to record oral reading activities and provide audio-based feedback. Although implementation remained limited, these practices reflected emerging digital assessment literacy within resource-constrained contexts [21].

The findings, therefore, challenge deficit-oriented representations of rural teachers by revealing substantial pedagogical resilience and contextual innovation despite institutional limitations.

4.5. Professional Agency and Reflective Practice

The final theme highlighted teachers' emerging sense of professional agency and reflective practice. Although participants operated within highly regulated assessment environments, many expressed a desire for greater pedagogical autonomy and contextual flexibility.

Teacher F explained:

"We know our learners better than policy does. If we were trusted, we could assess them better."

This statement reflects tensions between teacher professionalism and bureaucratic accountability structures. Participants frequently perceived district moderation processes as compliance-driven and restrictive rather than supportive.

Despite these constraints, several teachers demonstrated reflective professional habits. Teacher H noted:

"After every lesson, I ask myself what worked and what did not—I write it in my notebook."

Such practices indicate the development of professional reflexivity consistent with constructivist notions of continuous learning and self-evaluation. Teachers who engaged in collaborative reflection and informal peer mentoring appeared more confident in adapting assessment strategies to contextual realities.

The findings, therefore, suggest that strengthening assessment literacy requires more than technical training. It also requires recognising teachers as active pedagogical agents capable of designing contextually meaningful assessment practices.

4.6. Integrative Discussion

Collectively, the findings reveal that Grade 4 EFAL assessment practices in the Vhembe Cluster remain shaped by tensions between policy compliance and pedagogical responsiveness. While summative routines continue to dominate classroom practice, teachers simultaneously demonstrate emerging agency, innovation, and culturally responsive adaptation.

Viewed through Vygotsky's social constructivist lens, assessment functions as both a site of constraint and a potential space for mediated learning. Although institutional pressures frequently suppress formative experimentation, teachers' use of storytelling, peer dialogue, translanguaging, and reflective practice demonstrates the possibility of contextually grounded assessment transformation.

The findings, therefore, reposition rural teachers not merely as policy implementers, but as adaptive pedagogical actors negotiating complex multilingual and structural realities within African classrooms.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers in the Vhembe Cluster conceptualise and implement assessment within multilingual and resource-constrained rural classrooms. The findings revealed that assessment practices remain predominantly summative and compliance-oriented, despite national policy emphasis on formative assessment. Teachers demonstrated fragmented understanding of formative assessment principles, often equating continuous assessment with repetitive testing and administrative reporting. Structural challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, linguistic diversity, and limited digital infrastructure, further constrained the meaningful implementation of learner-centred assessment practices.

Despite these barriers, the study also revealed significant evidence of teacher resilience, contextual adaptation, and pedagogical creativity. Participants employed culturally responsive strategies such as storytelling, peer interaction, translanguaging, oral assessment, and low-tech digital feedback to support learner engagement and comprehension. These practices illustrate that rural teachers are not passive recipients of policy but active pedagogical agents capable of negotiating complex classroom realities through locally grounded innovations.

The study contributes to theory by extending Vygotsky's social constructivist framework to African multilingual assessment contexts. The findings demonstrate that assessment functions not merely as a measurement tool but as a socially mediated process shaped by language, culture, interaction, and context. In rural multilingual class-

rooms, formative assessment is most effective when teachers integrate learners' linguistic repertoires, communal knowledge systems, and culturally familiar communicative practices into classroom interaction. The study therefore advances an Africanised understanding of assessment literacy in which mediation occurs not only through formal instructional techniques but also through indigenous oral traditions, collaborative dialogue, and multilingual engagement.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce growing scholarly calls for decolonised and culturally responsive assessment approaches in African education systems. English-only assessment practices often obscure learners' conceptual understanding and marginalise home-language identities. In contrast, multilingual and culturally grounded assessment practices create opportunities for more inclusive participation, authentic meaning-making, and equitable learning experiences. The Vhembe context therefore illustrates the importance of recognising multilingualism as a pedagogical resource rather than a deficit within EFAL assessment.

Ultimately, the study argues that strengthening assessment literacy in rural South African schools requires a shift from bureaucratic compliance towards contextually responsive, learner-centred, and culturally sustaining assessment practices. Meaningful assessment transformation depends not only on policy reform but also on recognising teachers' professional agency, supporting reflective practice, and validating African multilingual classroom realities as legitimate spaces of knowledge construction and educational innovation.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that improving assessment literacy in rural English First Additional Language (EFAL) classrooms requires coordinated intervention at policy, institutional, pedagogical, and technological levels. The recommendations below are therefore proposed to strengthen formative assessment practices, support multilingual learning, and enhance teacher agency within rural South African schools.

6.1. Strengthen Teacher Professional Development in Assessment Literacy

The Department of Basic Education and provincial education authorities should prioritise sustained professional development programmes focusing specifically on formative assessment literacy in multilingual EFAL contexts. Existing workshops are often compliance-driven and disconnected from classroom realities. Continuous mentorship, coaching, and school-based professional learning communities should therefore be established to help teachers translate assessment theory into meaningful classroom practice. Training should focus on formative feedback strategies, rubric design, learner-centred assessment, peer assessment, and culturally responsive pedagogies.

6.2. Promote Multilingual and Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices

Assessment policies and classroom practices should recognise multilingualism as a pedagogical resource rather than a barrier. Teachers should be encouraged to integrate translanguaging, storytelling, oral narratives, dramatization, and bilingual scaffolding into formative assessment activities. Such approaches are particularly important in rural African classrooms where learners often construct meaning through indigenous languages and communal interaction. Supporting culturally responsive assessment would contribute to more inclusive and equitable language learning environments.

6.3. Reduce Compliance-Driven Assessment Pressures

District moderation systems should shift from excessive administrative monitoring toward developmental support for teachers. The current emphasis on frequent mark submission encourages repetitive summative testing and weakens the implementation of formative assessment. Assessment moderation should therefore focus not only on completed record books but also on the quality of learner feedback, classroom interaction, and evidence of learner progression. Greater flexibility should be provided for context-responsive assessment approaches within rural schools.

6.4. Improve Resource Provision and Digital Infrastructure

Rural schools require improved access to teaching and assessment resources, including graded readers, photocopying facilities, learner support materials, and stable digital infrastructure. Although some teachers demon-

strated creativity using mobile phones and audio-based assessment, inconsistent connectivity and inadequate technological support limited implementation. Investing in low-bandwidth, offline-compatible digital tools suitable for rural contexts would expand formative assessment opportunities and reduce teachers' administrative burdens.

6.5. Support Collaborative Professional Learning Communities

Schools and district offices should encourage the establishment of Communities of Practice (CoPs) where teachers can collaboratively share assessment strategies, reflect on classroom challenges, and co-develop contextualised assessment tools. Collaborative reflection strengthens teacher confidence, professional agency, and assessment innovation. Such networks are especially important in rural schools where teachers often work in isolation with limited professional support.

6.6. Reorient Teacher Education Programmes

Higher education institutions responsible for teacher preparation should strengthen assessment literacy within pre-service teacher education programmes. Modules on EFAL methodology should integrate practical training on formative assessment, multilingual pedagogy, digital assessment, and culturally responsive teaching. Teacher education curricula should also emphasise reflective practice and contextual adaptation to prepare graduates for rural and multilingual schooling environments.

6.7. Encourage Further Research on Multilingual Assessment in Rural Contexts

Further research should investigate how multilingual and decolonial assessment practices influence learner achievement, participation, and language development in African classrooms. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies would provide deeper insight into the sustainability of formative assessment interventions and digital innovations within rural schools. Future scholarship should continue centring teachers' lived experiences and indigenous knowledge systems in discussions of assessment reform and educational transformation.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, I.C.M. and N.M.N.; methodology, I.C.M.; formal analysis, I.C.M.; investigation, I.C.M.; resources, I.C.M.; data curation, I.C.M.; writing—original draft preparation, I.C.M.; writing—review and editing, I.C.M., N.M.N. and R.M.M.; visualization, I.C.M.; supervision, N.M.N.; project administration, I.C.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Venda (REC/SS/2024/07).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the support of participating schools, teachers, and the Limpopo Department of Education.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

References

1. Mulaudzi, I.C.; Lambani, M.N.; Klu, E.K.; et al. Digital literacy and assessment transformation in Limpopo's rural schools. *J. Educ. Res. Afr.* **2025**, *5*, 67–85.
2. Department of Basic Education (DBE). *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): English First Additional Language Grades 4–6*; Government Printer: Pretoria, South Africa, 2023.
3. Tlakula, K.; Monyai, P. Challenges of implementing continuous assessment in rural Limpopo schools. *S. Afr. Linguist. Appl. Lang. Stud.* **2025**, *43*, 1–19.
4. Ramaila, S.; Mphahlele, L. Teacher workload and assessment quality in South Africa's intermediate phase. *Perspect. Educ.* **2024**, *42*, 101–117.
5. Karakose, T.; Tülübaşı, T.; Papadakis, S. Revealing the intellectual structure and evolution of digital addiction research. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2022**, *19*, 14883.
6. Tülübaşı, T.; Karakose, T.; Papadakis, S. A holistic investigation of the relationship between digital addiction and academic achievement among students. *Eur. J. Investig. Health Psychol. Educ.* **2023**, *13*, 2006–2034.
7. Stiggins, R.; Chappuis, J.; Arter, J.; et al. *Assessment for Learning: Bridging Policy and Practice in African Schools*; UCL Press: Cape Town, South Africa, 2025.
8. Louw, J.; Prinsloo, C.; Phasha, N. Repositioning assessment for learning in South African classrooms. *S. Afr. J. Educ.* **2024**, *44*, 1–15.
9. Modisaotsile, B.M. Continuous assessment practices in rural Limpopo schools: Gaps and possibilities. *J. Lang. Teach.* **2022**, *56*, 1–14.
10. Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1978.
11. Mavhungu, R.N.; Netshandama, V. Culturally responsive pedagogy in South African rural classrooms: A pathway to equity. *Educ. Change* **2023**, *27*, 1–18.
12. Akpan, V.I.; Igwe, U.A.; Mpamah, I.B.I.; et al. Social constructivism: Implications on teaching and learning. *Br. J. Educ.* **2020**, *8*, 49–56.
13. Netshiombo, L.; Raphasha, N.; Baloyi, E. Teachers' perceptions of formative assessment in multilingual classrooms. *Afr. J. Lang. Learn.* **2025**, *6*, 22–40.
14. Nakamura, T.; Fujimoto, J.; Ayuzawa, K.; et al. Development and psychometric validation of the Japanese version of the pediatric eating assessment tool (PediEAT-J). *Speech Lang. Hear.* **2026**, *29*, 2651561.
15. Moyo, T.; Chirume, B.H.; Petersen, J. Assessing alternative pre-treatment methods to promote metal recovery in the leaching of printed circuit boards. *Resour. Conserv. Recycl.* **2020**, *152*, 104545.
16. Mavhungu, M.E.; Netshandama, V.O. Language diversity and resource scarcity in rural South African schools: Implications for teaching and learning. *S. Afr. J. Educ.* **2022**, *42*, 1–10.
17. Wenger, E. Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization* **2000**, *7*, 225–246.
18. Yin, R.K. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 7th ed.; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2023.
19. Achieng, B.; Kitetu, C.W.; Ogola, J.O. Parental Language Ideologies and Children's Linguistic Futures in Crosslinguistic Families in Kenya. *Editon Consort. J. Lit. Linguist. Stud.* **2025**, *7*, 50–61.
20. Department of Basic Education (DBE). *Integrated Continuous Assessment Framework (ICAF)*; DBE: Pretoria, South Africa, 2024.
21. Karakose, T.; Papadakis, S. Gamification Research in Sustainable Educational Settings: A Thematic Analysis Approach. *Int. J. Interact. Mob. Technol.* **2025**, *19*.
22. Black, P.; Wiliam, D. Classroom assessment and pedagogy. *Assess. Educ. Princ. Policy Pract.* **2018**, *25*, 551–575.
23. Brinkmann, S. *Qualitative Interviewing in Cross-Cultural Contexts*; Routledge: London, UK, 2024.

24. Patton, M.Q. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 5th ed.; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2023.
25. Stake, R.E. *The Art of Case Study Research*; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2023.
26. Chilisa, B. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 2nd ed.; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2020.
27. Creswell, J.W.; Creswell, J.D. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 6th ed.; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2023.



Copyright © 2026 by the author(s). Published by UK Scientific Publishing Limited. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Publisher's Note: The views, opinions, and information presented in all publications are the sole responsibility of the respective authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UK Scientific Publishing Limited and/or its editors. UK Scientific Publishing Limited and/or its editors hereby disclaim any liability for any harm or damage to individuals or property arising from the implementation of ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.