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Teachers' Perspectives on Punctuation Challenges among English First Additional Language Learners in South African Schools

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Abstract

Many English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners in rural and township schools in South Africa struggle to use punctuation correctly, despite its importance for clarity and coherence in writing. Although these learners are expected to write and communicate in English, punctuation difficulties continue to undermine the quality of their written work. This study explored teachers' perspectives on the punctuation challenges that EFAL learners experience in their writing. A qualitative case study design situated within the interpretivist paradigm was adopted; the case is defined as EFAL punctuation instruction in rural and township secondary schools in the Eastern Cape Province, comprising 12 EFAL teachers across 6 purposively selected schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, piloted and refined before use, and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, which generated 84 initial codes, 17 thematic categories, and five key themes. The findings revealed that learners construct long, unpunctuated sentences and misapply punctuation marks when they transfer isiXhosa grammatical conventions into English writing. Learners also tend to treat punctuation as a decorative convention rather than as a communicative tool. The study concludes that punctuation difficulties are not simply a product of individual learner deficiency but a reflection of broader linguistic, pedagogical, structural, and sociocultural conditions in under-resourced schools. Teachers are therefore encouraged to move beyond surface-level error correction toward guided mediation that draws on scaffolding and genre-responsive, context-sensitive pedagogy. This study contributes a contextualised application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to punctuation instruction in a multilingual, under-resourced South African schooling context and offers grounded practical implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and teacher educators working in similarly constrained settings.

Keywords: EFAL, punctuation, sociocultural theory, South Africa, teachers' perspectives, teacher cognition

1. Introduction

Punctuation plays an important role in organising written thought and facilitating communication among learners. Despite its importance, many learners in South African schools struggle to use it correctly in academic writing. English First Additional Language (EFAL) refers to a language that is not learners' mother tongue, yet it is used as the primary medium of instruction in most schools (Matiso, 2021), even though it remains an abstract and foreign language to many learners (Zano & Baloyi, 2025). This raises concerns about the quality of instruction and curriculum design, as well as the influence of sociocultural conditions on language learning in South African classrooms.

The ability of learners to write competently is a crucial determinant of academic success and social mobility in multilingual South African schools (Francis et al., 2019). Learners master punctuation when they recognise it not merely as a mechanical skill but as a higher-order communicative competence that enhances their ability to structure ideas and engage with academic discourse (Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020; Ghabool et al., 2012). Globally, research links the misuse of punctuation to learners' inability to write clearly and coherently (Raheem & Ghafar, 2024; Thy &

Nuong, 2025). This makes punctuation skills both educationally and practically necessary for EFAL learners to write effectively and express their thoughts coherently.

The Eastern Cape Province, where this study is situated, is characterised by sociolinguistic conditions that compound the difficulties learners face in improving their use of punctuation. Learners in this province mainly communicate in isiXhosa at home, where English is seldom used outside school. This reality creates what Audrey and Molotja (2023) describe as a triple barrier to English literacy affecting learners' writing competencies. Moses and Mohamad (2019) similarly identify a linguistic barrier arising from the structural distance between isiXhosa and English, which, together with limited daily exposure to English beyond the school context and the systemic conditions of most Eastern Cape schools, compounds the challenge of mastering English writing conventions.

Despite growing research interest in EFAL instruction in South African schools, a significant gap remains in studies that examine the lived realities of teachers and how they support learners in mastering punctuation in rural and township contexts; existing literature offers little investigation of the teaching strategies used in under-resourced schools (Al-Zayed, 2018; Dube & Steinke, 2025). This study addresses that gap by examining teachers' perspectives and experiences as a valuable lens for understanding the nature and scope of the punctuation challenges affecting EFAL learners, with the aim of generating context-sensitive insights that can inform teaching practice. The study is guided by the following research question: What are teachers' perspectives on the challenges of punctuation use among EFAL learners in South African schools?

2. Literature Review

Punctuation challenges among EFAL learners have been well documented internationally, although their significance in South African rural and township contexts remains underexplored. This review is organised around five themes: patterns of punctuation errors, teacher cognition and the mediating role of EFAL teachers, mother-tongue transfer, classroom conditions, and social and environmental influences. Figure 1 presents a conceptual map of these themes alongside the theoretical constructs.

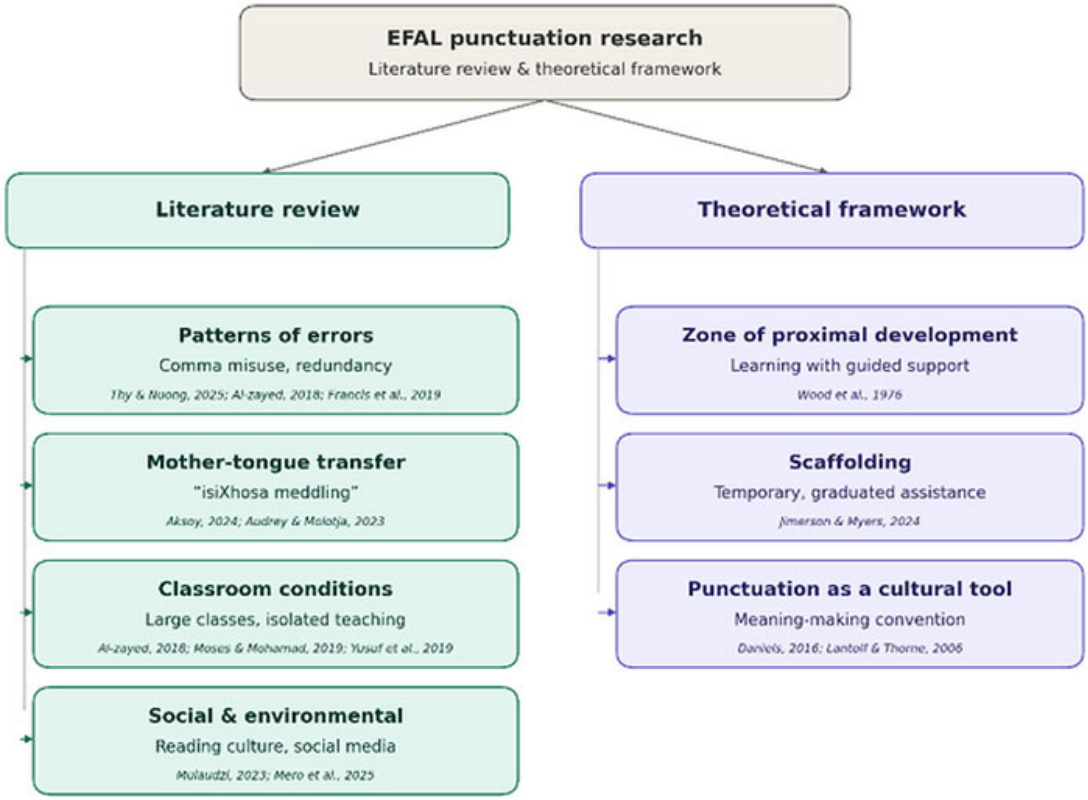


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of the Literature Review Themes and the Theoretical Framework Constructs, with Supporting Citations

2.1 Patterns of Punctuation Errors

Commas and full stops are among the most frequently misused punctuation marks in learners' English writing. Thy and Nuong (2025) found that EFAL learners either omit commas or misapply them in academic writing; this finding converges with Al-Zayed (2018), who argues that persistent sentence-level redundancy contributes to poor punctuation use. Francis et al. (2019) extend this analysis by showing that recurring errors disrupt the coherence of written discourse rather than representing isolated lapses. According to Raheem and Ghafar (2024), these challenges are attributable to learners' poor grasp of phrase-boundary marking and capitalisation conventions. Taken together, these studies agree that punctuation difficulties in the English classroom are systematic in character rather than random, although they differ on whether the primary driver is crosslinguistic interference or limited exposure to well-punctuated model texts. Both explanations are relevant to the South African context.

2.2 Teacher Cognition and the Mediating Role of EFAL Teachers

The existing literature on EFAL learners' punctuation difficulties has concentrated predominantly on identifying error patterns, their linguistic origins, and their classroom consequences (Raheem & Ghafar, 2024; Thy & Nuong, 2025). What remains underexplored is how teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, and contextual understanding shape the instructional choices they make in response to these difficulties. This gap is significant because teachers' responses to learners' punctuation errors are not simply technical decisions; they are mediated by what Borg (2003) calls teacher cognition: the complex, professionally situated network of beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes that teachers bring to their classrooms and that determine how they interpret learner performance and design instructional interventions.

Freeman (2002) argues that teacher knowledge in language education is fundamentally experiential and contextual, developed through years of practice rather than through formal training alone. In the South African rural and township school context, this means that EFAL teachers accumulate a form of contextual knowledge about learners' punctuation challenges that is not captured in curriculum documents or pre-service teacher education programmes. Burns and Richards (2009) similarly show that language teachers' craft knowledge, that is, what experienced teachers know about how their learners learn, constitutes a valuable and underutilised resource for understanding language-learning barriers. Focusing on teachers' perspectives in research on EFAL punctuation difficulties therefore does more than document the problem; it surfaces the experiential knowledge base from which contextually realistic pedagogical responses can be developed. Research in South African language education contexts has consistently found that positioning teachers as knowledgeable practitioners generates insights that deficit-oriented, learner-focused studies have missed (Dube & Steinke, 2025; Zano & Baloyi, 2025). The current study extends this orientation specifically to punctuation instruction, where the gap identified by this review remains significant.

2.3 Mother-Tongue Transfer

In South Africa, learners' first language has been observed to influence the punctuation errors they make in English writing. Aksoy (2024) found that the primary use of the home language in rural and township schools in the Eastern Cape is a major source of interference underlying EFAL learners' punctuation struggles. Audrey and Molotja (2023) term this "isiXhosa meddling," whereby learners transfer isiXhosa speech and writing conventions into their English work, producing systematic errors in capitalisation and comma use. This pattern aligns with research on other multilingual contexts: Raheem and Ghafar (2024) documented similar capitalisation and boundary-marking confusion in Arabic-English contexts, while Thy and Nuong (2025) found comparable interference effects in Vietnamese-English writing. Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) further found that limited metalinguistic awareness restricts learners' ability to apply punctuation rules correctly irrespective of which languages are in contact. These convergent findings suggest that learners' punctuation difficulties are not simply a matter of inability to follow English writing rules, but are shaped by crosslinguistic interference and limited awareness of the structural differences between the home language and the target language.

2.4 Classroom Conditions

Classroom conditions in most South African rural and township schools shape how teachers approach punctuation instruction and how learners are introduced to English writing conventions. Al-Zayed (2018) argues that teachers' capacity to handle punctuation instruction is constrained by systemic pressures within classrooms and schools. Similarly, Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) caution that punctuation instruction presented in isolation from communicative purpose impairs learners' ability to use punctuation meaningfully. According to Moses and Mohamad (2019), factors such as large class sizes, poor infrastructure, and a shortage of experienced teachers disrupt schools' capacity to support learners' writing. Yusuf et al. (2019) accordingly advocate for code-switching and collaborative

learning as scaffolding strategies to support learners' English writing, though such approaches risk reinforcing errors when they are not complemented by authentic text modelling and corrective feedback.

2.5 Social and Environmental Influences

Beyond the classroom, social and environmental factors shape how EFAL learners engage with English academic writing. Mulaudzi (2023) notes that teachers understand learners' punctuation struggles through a broader lens that includes limited exposure to formal written language in rural and township communities. This is echoed by Mero et al. (2025), who attribute learners' punctuation struggles to a weak reading culture and the normalisation of informal electronic communication. Raheem and Ghafar (2024) similarly highlight social media platforms as a factor that makes it difficult for learners to reconcile informal messaging conventions with academic writing standards. Mulaudzi (2023) further argues that these challenges are socially and culturally mediated and therefore cannot be resolved through instructional adjustments in the English classroom alone; they require attention to the school, community, and social contexts in which learners develop their relationship with language and writing.

The studies reviewed provide a broad framework for understanding the punctuation challenges EFAL learners encounter. However, most do not centre the experiences and views of EFAL teachers in rural and township schools, where systemic constraints, linguistic diversity, and limited resources make mediating English punctuation a daily challenge that is rarely captured in the existing evidence base. This study addresses this gap by sustaining attention on the instructional challenges that teachers in rural and township schools in the Eastern Cape face, and on their perspectives as a source of contextual knowledge, grounded in the tradition of teacher cognition research described in Section 2.2.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, which holds that cognitive development occurs through social interaction and the mediation of cultural tools within specific social and historical contexts (Alkhudiry, 2022). This theory is relevant because it treats language not merely as a system of rules to be memorised, but as a dynamic, culturally embedded tool that enables learners to construct meaningful texts in English. It helps explain why punctuation struggles cannot be addressed through rule-based instruction alone.

Two constructs from sociocultural theory inform this study's analytical framework. The first is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the cognitive space between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with the support of a more knowledgeable other (Wood et al., 1976). In the EFAL classroom, the ZPD suggests that punctuation competence can be improved through structured, responsive teacher support. The second construct is scaffolding, which emphasises the temporary, graduated assistance that teachers or more capable peers provide to help learners internalise new writing and punctuation skills (Jimerson & Myers, 2024). This may include corrective feedback, peer review, think-aloud modelling, and exposure to well-punctuated model texts.

Within this framework, punctuation marks are understood as cultural tools that allow writers to organise discourse and signal meaning to readers (Daniels, 2016). For isiXhosa-speaking learners, these tools are both technical conventions and cultural-linguistic artefacts that must be internalised through repeated, purposeful engagement within supportive social environments in the classroom (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This framing supports the argument that punctuation difficulties are socially and culturally mediated rather than evidence of learners' inability to use punctuation (Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020; Jimerson & Myers, 2024). It positions teachers as cultural mediators who create the conditions for learners to master English writing conventions and to use punctuation effectively.

Within this framework, the distinction between punctuation as a cultural tool and punctuation as a mechanical rule has observable empirical implications. A learner who uses punctuation as a cultural tool deploys it with communicative intentionality: a full stop marks the completion of a thought for a reader; a comma marks a clause boundary within a complex sentence; a colon signals that an elaboration follows. By contrast, a learner who treats punctuation as a mechanical rule applies it based on visual, aesthetic, or rote-memorised cues disconnected from communicative purpose, for example, placing a full stop when a line "looks long enough," or inserting a comma at arbitrary intervals irrespective of syntactic structure. The analysis in Section 5 traces this distinction through participants' accounts, allowing the theoretical framework to function as an analytical instrument rather than a background reference.

4. Method

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design situated within the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist approach is appropriate when the aim is to develop a rich, contextualised understanding of human experience and meaning-making, rather than to produce generalisable statistical findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative case study was well-suited to this study because it allowed for detailed examination of context-specific realities, enabling in-depth exploration of how teachers perceive and respond to EFAL learners' punctuation challenges in their school and classroom environments.

The case in this study is EFAL punctuation instruction in rural and township secondary schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: a bounded system characterised by shared structural conditions, namely the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), under-resourced school infrastructure, and an isiXhosa-dominant sociolinguistic environment, constituted by twelve EFAL teachers across six purposively selected schools. The unit of analysis is teachers' perspectives on the challenges of EFAL learners' use of punctuation within this institutional and sociolinguistic context. As Yin (2018) argues, the case study design is effective for holistic inquiry into contemporary educational phenomena within their real-life contexts.

The case study design was selected over phenomenology and grounded theory on methodological grounds. Phenomenology was not selected because its focus on the experiential structure of individual consciousness would have foregrounded the subjective texture of teachers' lived experience while setting aside the institutional and curricular conditions this study treats as central to the phenomenon. Grounded theory was not selected because it requires iterative theoretical sampling to conceptual saturation across multiple analytical cycles, a process that was neither methodologically feasible within the study's scope nor aligned with its descriptive-interpretive intent.

4.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa and focused on secondary schools in rural and township settings. These schools were selected because they reflect the sociolinguistic conditions of disadvantaged communities in which isiXhosa-speaking learners encounter English as a first additional language. The case study was bounded by EFAL instruction at these schools, with particular attention to teachers' experiences and observations of learners' ability to write and use punctuation effectively.

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to select twelve teachers from six secondary schools. Purposive sampling ensures that participants are selected for their ability to provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Each school contributed two EFAL teachers with at least three years of teaching experience in township or rural secondary schools. All six schools were classified as Quintile 1 or 2 under the South African school funding system, indicating no-fee public schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. IsiXhosa was the dominant home language of each school community. Rather than asserting that data saturation was achieved, the sample is described as adequate for generating a range of perspectives consistent with the study's exploratory purpose within a purposively selected, professionally homogeneous group. Following Guest et al. (2006), thematic redundancy, defined as the point at which no new thematic categories emerged across successive interviews, was observed from the tenth interview onward and monitored during analysis. Table 1 below presents the participant profile.

Table 1. Profile of Participating Teachers

Pseudonym	Exp. (yrs)	Qualification	Home Language	Grades	Class Size
Teacher A	7	PGCE	isiXhosa	10, 11, 12	~58
Teacher B	5	BEd	isiXhosa	10, 11	~45
Teacher C	12	BEd Hons	isiXhosa	11, 12	~62
Teacher D	8	PGCE	isiXhosa	10, 11, 12	~55
Teacher E	4	BEd	isiXhosa	10, 12	~48
Teacher F	15	BEd Hons	isiXhosa	12	~60
Teacher G	6	PGCE	isiXhosa	10, 11	~52
Teacher H	9	BEd	isiXhosa	11, 12	~50
Teacher I	3	PGCE	isiXhosa	10, 11, 12	~43
Teacher J	11	BEd Hons	isiXhosa	10, 12	~57
Teacher K	7	BEd	isiXhosa	11	~48
Teacher L	5	PGCE	isiXhosa	12	~65

Table 1 presents the class sizes, which approximate the averages reported by participants. BEd = Bachelor of Education; BEd Hons = Bachelor of Education Honours; PGCE = Postgraduate Certificate in Education. From the table, three participants taught exclusively in Grade 12; seven taught across multiple grades; two taught Grades 10 and 11 only.

4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary instrument for data collection. This method was preferred for its flexibility, which allows participants to express their views freely while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide comprised eight open-ended questions designed to elicit teachers' experiences, observations, interpretations, and instructional responses regarding learners' punctuation challenges in English writing. Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted only after participants had signed written consent. Voice recordings were made with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Before use in the main study, the interview guide was piloted with two EFAL teachers from a secondary school in the same district that was not included in the main sample. Pilot feedback led to the revision of two questions: Question 3, which originally conflated punctuation instruction with grammar instruction in general, was rephrased to foreground punctuation conventions specifically; and Question 7 was separated into two distinct prompts after pilot participants found the original compound formulation difficult to answer coherently. The revised guide was reviewed by an experienced qualitative researcher at the Faculty of Education of the researchers' institution before data collection commenced. The full interview guide is reproduced in Appendix A.

The researchers occupied an insider-outsider position in relation to the study context: both are trained in language education in the Eastern Cape and familiar with the schooling conditions described by participants, which facilitated rapport during interviews, while neither was employed at the participating schools, which helped limit social desirability bias in participants' responses. This positioning was made explicit to participants at the outset of each interview.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Familiarisation involved three complete readings of each transcript, with analytic notes recorded after each reading to document initial impressions and recurring patterns. Coding was conducted line-by-line, with codes applied to units of meaning rather than to complete sentences or speaker turns. The approach was primarily inductive: codes emerged from the data rather than from a predetermined list, though Vygotsky's sociocultural theory served as an analytical sensitizing lens at the theme-review and theme-naming stages, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) flexible approach to theory in thematic analysis.

A total of 84 initial codes were generated across the twelve transcripts. Systematic comparison across the coded data grouped these into 17 preliminary thematic categories. Further iterative review and refinement across two additional analytical passes collapsed these categories into the five overarching themes reported. A codebook listing all codes, their definitions, and illustrative data extracts was maintained throughout and is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Analysis was conducted manually; no qualitative data analysis software was used. A generative AI tool (Grammarly) was used solely for language editing during manuscript preparation and played no role in data collection, coding, or interpretation.

Disconfirming cases were actively sought during the theme-review stage. One participant, Teacher K, reported that her learners used punctuation more deliberately in narrative writing tasks than in expository tasks, a pattern she attributed to learners' greater familiarity with narrative story structure from their isiXhosa literacy background. This observation does not fit within the theme of purely mechanical use of punctuation and is discussed as a qualifying finding that points to genre and task design as potentially moderating variables.

Reflexivity: The main researcher has been trained in language education and is professionally familiar with the Eastern Cape schooling conditions described by participants whilst the second researcher is an experienced researcher with years of experience in research methodology. This familiarity facilitated probing depth but also created a risk that the analysis would confirm rather than interrogate participants' accounts of systemic constraint. This risk was managed through three practices: a systematic search for disconfirming cases during theme review; peer debriefing with two colleagues not involved in the study; and a reflexive analytical check at the theme-naming stage in which each theme was tested against the question of whether it could be explained by a factor not captured in the data. The researchers' outsider position relative to the specific schools reduced the likelihood of social desirability moderation in participants'

responses (Finlay, 2002). These reflexive commitments were treated as ongoing analytical practices rather than as biographical disclosures.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical principles throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured through the use of pseudonyms. Written permission from the relevant District Education Office and school principals was obtained before recruitment commenced. Data are stored securely in accordance with institutional guidelines and will be retained for five years before being destroyed.

Trustworthiness was ensured through four strategies. Prolonged engagement: data collection spanned eight weeks across two school terms, during which both researchers maintained regular contact with the schools and conducted follow-up written communication with participants after each transcript to clarify ambiguous responses before coding. Member checking: a condensed three-page summary of the interpreted findings was returned to seven of the twelve participants approximately four weeks after the completion of interviews; all seven confirmed the general accuracy of the representation, and two requested minor phrasing adjustments, which were incorporated. Peer debriefing: two Faculty of Education colleagues with expertise in qualitative research, neither of whom was involved in data collection, coding, or the research relationship, reviewed the codebook and preliminary theme structure; their feedback prompted the consolidation of an initial six-theme structure into five, by merging two closely related categories that peer review identified as insufficiently distinct. Transparent audit trail: the original recordings, verbatim transcripts, coded transcripts, codebook, and theme development memos are retained by the corresponding author and are available on request. These strategies collectively addressed the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Ahmed, 2024).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

The thematic analysis generated five main themes that address the study's research question: What are teachers' perspectives on the challenges of punctuation use among EFAL learners in South African schools? Table 2 summarises these five themes, the supporting evidence, and their implications. Across all five themes, participants consistently located the source of learners' punctuation difficulties not in individual ability but in the interaction of linguistic, pedagogical, structural, and sociocultural conditions, a convergence that is interpreted theoretically in the discussion that follows.

Table 2. Summary of Themes from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description of Finding	Illustrative Evidence	Implications
1. Linguistic transfer from isiXhosa to English	Teachers perceived that learners transfer isiXhosa writing conventions into English, producing inappropriate punctuation use. Learners rely on first-language patterns because English punctuation rules are unfamiliar.	"English punctuation rules do not exist in isiXhosa… most of them write long sentences because they try to translate a continuous thought rule in the isiXhosa language." (Teacher H). "English punctuation rules are completely abstract and foreign to them." (Teacher C)	Cross-linguistic interference requires explicit contrastive instruction that distinguishes isiXhosa and English punctuation conventions.
2. Weak foundation in sentence structure	Teachers reported that learners have limited understanding of sentence construction and use punctuation mechanically rather than meaningfully.	"As long as there is space for writing, they do not put punctuation." (Teacher F). "My learners do not have adequate knowledge about how to construct proper sentences… I have to take them through the basics." (Teacher A)	Poor knowledge of sentence structure limits the functional role of punctuation; remediation of foundational writing skills is necessary.
3. Overcrowded classrooms and limited individual feedback	Large class sizes prevent teachers from providing regular, detailed, individualised feedback on learners' punctuation errors.	"I have roughly 62 learners… it becomes difficult to check their work and provide feedback." (Teacher D). "I just skim through the work." (Teacher L)	Limited corrective feedback allows errors to persist; peer-based scaffolding strategies may offer a partial structural response.

Table 2. Summary of Themes from the Thematic Analysis (continued)

Theme	Description of Finding	Illustrative Evidence	Implications
4. Insufficient instructional time for punctuation	Teachers believed the curriculum allocates inadequate time for explicit punctuation instruction, making it difficult to address accumulated writing deficiencies.	"Teachers teach punctuation… for only a period of 60 minutes in a week." (Teacher). "We can't address this problem… in just one week as prescribed by the curriculum." (Teacher E)	Restricted teaching time limits sustained intervention; curriculum time allocation warrants further review.
5. Digital communication and weak reading culture	Teachers identified social media writing habits and limited reading as compounding factors in learners' poor punctuation competence.	"Writing on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp… makes teaching and learning of punctuation confusing." (Teacher B). "Most of my learners are not able to read for pleasure." (Teacher D)	Informal digital literacy and limited model-text exposure reduce learners' opportunities to internalise conventional punctuation use.

5.1.1 Linguistic Transfer from isiXhosa to English

Most teachers linked learners' punctuation struggles directly to the transfer of isiXhosa writing conventions into English. Teacher H explained: "English punctuation rules do not exist in isiXhosa which is the learners' home language. English is just the First Additional Language. Most of them write long sentences because they try to translate a continuous thought rule in the isiXhosa language." Teacher C observed: "The way learners use capital letters, especially for proper nouns, which is the rule in Xhosa writing, is concerning. This is because English punctuation rules are completely abstract and foreign to them." Teacher J extended this observation to sentence structure: "When I mark their essays, I sometimes read three or four ideas in one sentence with no punctuation at all. They are writing the way they think in isiXhosa, not the way English sentences are structured." Teacher G described a specific capitalisation error pattern: "In isiXhosa, certain categories of nouns are always capitalised, and learners carry this over. They capitalise English words that they consider important, not English words that the grammar requires." These responses reveal that learners apply their understanding of isiXhosa writing conventions to English writing, producing systematic errors that reflect cross-linguistic interference rather than random mistakes.

5.1.2 Weak Foundation in Sentence Structure

Punctuation was used mechanically rather than meaningfully, reflecting learners' limited foundational understanding of English sentence construction. Teacher F noted: "Learners usually put a full stop at the end of the sentence because they find the paper to be long and filled. As long as there is space for writing, they do not put punctuation." Teacher A similarly observed: "My learners do not have adequate knowledge about how to construct proper sentences. I have to take them through the basics, even in Grade 12, which is not what the CAPS curriculum allows time for." Teacher B described the production of incomplete clauses: "They write fragments. A full thought would require two or three clauses joined by correct punctuation, but they stop midway or just continue without any marking." Teacher I added: "Learners use a full stop not because they have completed a thought, but because they have reached the end of a line. The full stop is a visual signal to them, not a grammatical one." One participant offered a qualifying observation relevant to this pattern. Teacher K reported that her learners demonstrated more deliberate use of punctuation in narrative writing tasks than in expository tasks, a difference she attributed to learners' greater familiarity with narrative story structure in their home language backgrounds. This disconfirming case is taken up in the discussion.

5.1.3 Overcrowded Classrooms and Limited Individual Feedback

Participants consistently described large class sizes as a structural barrier to providing the individualised feedback that corrective instruction requires. Teacher D explained: "I have roughly 62 learners in my class who struggle to effectively participate in writing. When they are given an English writing activity, it becomes difficult to check their work and provide feedback." Teacher L added: "Giving detailed feedback on individual learners' use of commas becomes very difficult to practically achieve, so I just skim through the work." Teacher C identified the cumulative consequence: "With so many learners, I can mark the work, but I cannot explain to each one why their punctuation is wrong. They get the mark, they see the red pen, but they do not understand what they did incorrectly. The next piece of writing has the same mistakes." Teacher G connected this structural challenge to learners' progressive deterioration in writing competence: "Learners who are not corrected do not improve. By Grade 11 or 12, they have been making the same comma errors for years because nobody has had the time to sit with them and explain." The lack of sustained

corrective support means learners continue to make the same punctuation mistakes, a systemic challenge difficult to overcome within existing structural conditions.

5.1.4 Insufficient Instructional Time for Punctuation

Most teachers were concerned that the curriculum allocates inadequate time for explicit punctuation instruction. One teacher noted: "Teachers teach punctuation in language structures and conventions for only a period of 60 minutes a week." Teacher E elaborated: "We as educators cannot address this problem that has been created over the years in just one period a week as prescribed by the curriculum." Teacher F contextualised the depth of the challenge relative to the time available: "The gaps that learners bring from primary school take more than one lesson to close. I would need months of focused instruction on sentence construction alone, but the CAPS does not give us that." Teacher H described the practical consequence for lesson planning: "I have to move on to the next topic even when I know the learners have not understood punctuation. If I stop to reteach, I fall behind the work schedule, and then there are other problems at the end of the year." These responses show that inadequate instructional time reduces teachers' opportunities to address deep-rooted punctuation gaps and forces content progression at the expense of consolidation.

5.1.5 Digital Communication and Weak Reading Culture

The informal conventions of social media and digital communication, combined with learners' disengagement from reading, were reported across participants as compounding factors in poor punctuation competence. Teacher B observed: "Learners engage in frequent writing on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which do not require the use of punctuation like commas and full stops. This makes teaching and learning of punctuation confusing for learners." Teacher D noted: "Most of my learners are not able to read for pleasure because they find it to be a difficult activity." Teacher A connected limited reading directly to the absence of punctuation models: "If a learner has never read a properly punctuated paragraph, they have no model for what correct punctuation looks like. They are writing from nothing." Teacher K synthesised the two factors: "The social media writing and the not reading go together. Learners spend hours on WhatsApp, where there are no capital letters and no full stops, and they spend no time reading books. When they come to write formally, they have no reference point for what English writing should look like." Together, these five themes reveal that the challenges affecting learners' punctuation competence are interconnected. Participants consistently located learners' difficulties within broader structural, linguistic, and sociocultural conditions, not in individual ability alone.

5.2 Discussion

The discussion below draws on the relevant literature and sociocultural theory to interpret teachers' perspectives analytically. Rather than restating findings, each subsection identifies what the current data confirm, extend, or qualify relative to prior work, considers at least one alternative explanation, and uses the theoretical framework as an interpretive instrument rather than a summary label. Across all five themes, the data reveal that the conditions for ZPD-based mediation are disrupted at multiple levels simultaneously: cross-linguistic interference prevents learners from engaging with punctuation as a communicative tool; class size prevents teachers from occupying the role of the more knowledgeable other; and curriculum time constraints prevent the iterative practice through which internalisation, the mechanism Vygotsky identifies as central to learning, can take place.

5.2.1 Linguistic Transfer from isiXhosa

Most participants expressed concern about learners' tendency to construct long, continuous sentences in English without appropriate punctuation, a pattern attributable to the influence of isiXhosa grammatical conventions. These observations confirm and extend Aksoy (2024), who found that home-language interference in disadvantaged schools is a primary source of punctuation errors in learners' English writing. The current data extend this finding by identifying specific surface manifestations: capitalisation patterns carried over from isiXhosa noun conventions (Teacher G), continuous-thought sentence structures reflecting the absence of English boundary-marking in the home language (Teacher H), and the perception among learners that English punctuation rules are "completely abstract and foreign" (Teacher C). Audrey and Molotja (2023) similarly found that isiXhosa speech patterns infiltrate learners' English writing, disrupting coherence and clarity.

One alternative explanation for the patterns described by participants is that the punctuation errors observed in learners' writing reflect assessment pressure and timed-writing conditions rather than crosslinguistic transfer. Under examination conditions, learners may prioritise generating content over attending to punctuation, producing errors that would not appear in more carefully edited writing. Participants' accounts do not support this interpretation: the errors they described were consistently observed across written classwork, homework, and examination conditions,

suggesting that the pattern reflects a systematic cognitive orientation toward isiXhosa writing conventions rather than a situation-specific performance deficit.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings indicate that learners have not yet internalised English punctuation conventions as functional cultural tools for writing. A learner who produces long unpunctuated sentences, as Teacher H described, is not deliberately ignoring English conventions; they are drawing on the only writing conventions that have been sufficiently mediated and internalised to guide their production. This is a ZPD observation: the learner is operating within a first-language cognitive frame that requires structured bridging toward English boundary-marking conventions through sustained, contextualised mediation, rather than rule-presentation.

5.2.2 Weak Foundational Understanding of Sentence Structure

A major theme was that many EFAL learners lacked a sound understanding of English sentence construction, reflected in their treatment of punctuation as a visual or aesthetic device rather than a marker of completed thought. These findings align with Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020), who argue that limited metalinguistic knowledge is an obstacle to effective punctuation use, and with Ghabool et al. (2012), who describe learners' difficulty in constructing complex sentences as a structural challenge requiring urgent pedagogical attention. The current data extend this by showing that the pattern is not confined to sentence-level complexity: learners in the schools studied placed full stops based on page length rather than semantic completion, indicating that the functional role of punctuation as a communicative tool has not been internalised at even the most basic level.

The disconfirming case offered by Teacher K qualifies this finding. Her observation that learners punctuated narrative writing more deliberately than they did in expository tasks suggests that the relationship between foundational knowledge and punctuation use is not uniform across genres. Where learners have internalised a narrative structure, whether from the home language or from story exposure, the same structural knowledge may scaffold a more communicative orientation to punctuation. This finding points toward genre-responsive writing tasks as a pedagogical entry point: assigning narrative writing tasks as a first step may provide learners with a familiar structural scaffold on which more explicit punctuation instruction can be built before extending to expository forms.

From the ZPD perspective, these challenges reveal that many learners require mediated support to construct English sentences at the most foundational level. Daniels (2016) contends that punctuation is a cultural tool through which writers construct meaning for readers, not merely a set of mechanical conventions. Learners whose construction of English sentences is itself uncertain cannot be expected to deploy punctuation communicatively. Targeted scaffolding activities, including sentence-combining tasks, guided writing, and systematic instruction in how punctuation signals sentence boundaries, are needed to close this foundational gap.

5.2.3 Overcrowded Classrooms and Limited Feedback

Large class sizes restricted teachers' ability to provide individualised feedback and to engage with individual learners' writing. Moses and Mohamad (2019) similarly found that large class sizes make it difficult to align instruction with meaningful classroom practice. Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) add that feedback under such conditions tends to focus on correcting surface-level errors without engaging learners in dialogue about why their punctuation is incorrect or how to improve it, a form of correction that does not build metalinguistic understanding. Participants' accounts confirm that superficial marking practices in under-resourced schools fail to provide the sustained guidance learners need; Teacher C's observation that learners "see the red pen, but they do not understand what they did incorrectly" is a precise description of the failure of decontextualised error-marking.

Vygotsky's (1978) framework does not treat the ZPD as an attribute of the individual learner that exists independently of social context; it is constituted through the interaction between a learner and a more knowledgeable other. Overcrowded classrooms do not merely reduce the efficiency of ZPD-based instruction: they eliminate the structural condition under which the ZPD can be activated for most learners in the room. When a teacher has 62 learners and can provide only surface marking, the more knowledgeable other role that sociocultural theory assigns to the mediating adult is structurally unavailable. The theoretical implication is significant: it is not primarily the quality of punctuation instruction that is constrained by overcrowding; it is the structural possibility of mediated learning itself. Yusuf et al. (2019) accordingly suggest that peer-based scaffolding strategies, including structured peer review and collaborative writing tasks, can distribute feedback responsibilities among learners as a partial response to this structural constraint.

5.2.4 Curriculum Time Constraints

Participants identified the inadequacy of the CAPS time allocation to language structures and conventions as a systemic barrier to punctuation instruction. These findings align with Jimerson and Myers (2024), who argue that curricular rigidity does not permit teachers to sustain the continuous mediation learners need to internalise new

linguistic knowledge, and with Al-Zayed (2018), who identifies curriculum-imposed systemic constraints as a key factor preventing learners from developing a coherent understanding of punctuation. Francis et al. (2019) acknowledge the need to align curriculum design with instructional time and learning outcomes; this alignment remains absent from the current CAPS framework governing EFAL instruction in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase.

From a sociocultural perspective, teaching and learning that lack continuity and adequate time for practice impede the internalisation process central to Vygotsky's theory. Daniels (2016) argues that punctuation must be understood as a tool for constructing meaning rather than a set of isolated rules to be memorised. Without adequate time for contextualised, iterative practice, learners are unlikely to move from mechanical rule recall to the meaningful use of punctuation as a communicative resource. Participants' sense of being caught between the curriculum's progression demands and their learners' remedial needs captures the concrete classroom consequence of this theoretical gap.

5.2.5 Influence of Digital Communication and Limited Reading Culture

The influence of social media, digital communication tools, and a limited reading culture was identified as a significant compounding factor. Most participants noted that learners approach formal English writing tasks with the same informal register they use on social media, where punctuation conventions are neither required nor observed. Mero et al. (2025) support this finding by linking poor reading habits and the normalisation of informal digital communication to learners' struggles with formal writing standards. Raheem and Ghafar (2024) similarly found that social media writing conventions directly contribute to learners' inability to distinguish informal messaging from formal academic writing. Mulaudzi (2023) adds a contextual qualification: these challenges are socially and culturally mediated and therefore cannot be resolved through instructional adjustments in the English classroom alone; they require attention to the broader social and community contexts in which learners develop their relationship with language.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, these findings emphasise the role of cultural tools and social environments in shaping learners' cognitive development and their use of punctuation. The cultural tools learners encounter outside the classroom, particularly social media platforms, conflict with the writing conventions taught in the classroom, creating what Sarip et al. (2021) describe as a register-switching challenge that requires metacognitive scaffolding to navigate. Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) caution that without exposure to adequate English writing and guided reflection, learners cannot develop the metalinguistic awareness required for punctuation competence. Cultivating a reading culture, by making grade-appropriate English texts available and by designing classroom tasks that require close reading of well-punctuated prose, represents a structural response to this challenge within the teacher's sphere of influence.

Taken together, these five themes show that EFAL learners' punctuation difficulties cannot be attributed to a single source. Linguistic transfer, weak foundational knowledge, overcrowded classrooms, curriculum time constraints, and informal digital literacy practices interact to shape learners' engagement with punctuation. Each theme marks a point at which the mediation of learners' needs, whether from teachers, texts, or the wider school environment, is disrupted or diminished. Improving learners' punctuation competence, therefore, requires coordinated attention to instructional methods, curriculum design, and the broader literacy environment.

6. Conclusion

This study explored teachers' experiences and perceptions of the challenges confronting EFAL learners' use of punctuation in rural and township schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The findings show that learners' punctuation challenges are not a matter of deficiency but are shaped by a combination of linguistic, instructional, curricular, and sociocultural factors. Five themes emerged, together providing an in-depth understanding of the conditions affecting EFAL learners' ability to use punctuation effectively.

A major finding was that many EFAL learners have not developed the ability to use punctuation effectively to construct meaningful sentences. Learners tend to apply punctuation mechanically, based on visual cues such as sentence length, and transfer their understanding of isiXhosa writing conventions into English. This gap extends beyond the classroom: introducing foundational writing instruction earlier across the grades, and giving Grade 10 teachers the time and tools to diagnose and address these gaps on entry to the FET phase, could help prevent learners from arriving at Grade 12 without the foundational punctuation knowledge the curriculum expects them to have.

The study also showed that structural conditions in South African rural and township schools, including overcrowded classrooms, congested timetables, and a rigid curriculum, restrict teachers' ability to provide the sustained, responsive mediation that sociocultural theory identifies as critical to punctuation development. These conditions leave teachers caught between a content-driven curriculum and learners' instructional needs for time, feedback, and practice.

The practical implications below are offered as considerations for curriculum designers, school leaders, and teacher educators rather than as prescriptive policy mandates. They are grounded in the accounts of twelve teachers in a specific geographic area of the Eastern Cape and should be read with that scope in mind; larger-scale studies across multiple provinces would be needed before any of these considerations could support systemic policy revision.

For classroom practice, punctuation instruction is more effective when embedded in authentic writing activities rather than presented as an isolated grammar exercise. Sentence-combining tasks, genre-responsive narrative writing, guided peer review, and repeated exposure to well-punctuated model texts provide the structured, socially mediated practice that sociocultural theory identifies as crucial for internalising new writing conventions. For teacher development, these findings point toward a need for in-service training that equips EFAL teachers with practical, low-resource scaffolding strategies suited to large, under-resourced classrooms rather than approaches that assume small class sizes or abundant marking time. For curriculum considerations, the time currently allocated to language structures and conventions in CAPS may not match the scale of the foundational gaps many learners carry into the FET phase; this warrants further investigation, particularly in provinces characterised by structural conditions similar to those in the Eastern Cape.

Theoretically, this study applies Vygotsky's sociocultural framework to EFAL punctuation instruction in a multilingual, under-resourced South African schooling context. The application reveals that the ZPD and scaffolding operate not only at the level of individual teacher-learner interaction but also within broader structural conditions, such as class size, curriculum time, and access to reading material, that determine whether the conditions for meaningful mediation exist at all. The study contributes a contextualised application of sociocultural theory to a setting in which it has rarely been used, rather than a theoretical extension; it demonstrates that the framework's explanatory reach encompasses both structural and pedagogical dimensions of punctuation learning.

Addressing the punctuation challenges EFAL learners experience in South African rural and township schools requires more than isolated classroom interventions; it requires coordinated attention from teachers, school leaders, curriculum designers, and policymakers to the conditions under which meaningful mediation can take place. The teachers in this study showed considerable resourcefulness in adapting their practice to constrained environments, and their perspectives offer a grounded starting point for designing realistic support for the schools in which they work.

6.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample was drawn from twelve teachers across six schools in a specific geographic area of the Eastern Cape Province, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other South African provinces or educational settings. The qualitative design allowed for an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of teachers' perceptions but did not employ measures that could establish the scale or severity of learners' punctuation difficulties across a larger population. The study focused exclusively on teachers' perceptions, without analysing learners' own experiences and views or learners' written work directly.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating mixed-methods designs that combine interviews with textual analysis of learners' writing and learner-reported data. Studies that centre learners' own perspectives would provide a complementary understanding of the factors affecting their punctuation development. Longitudinal studies tracking the impact of specific scaffolding or genre-responsive writing interventions on learners' punctuation over time would provide evidence to improve instructional practice. The disconfirming case identified in this study, the possibility that narrative genre facilitates more deliberate punctuation use, warrants dedicated investigation through classroom-based research. Finally, comparative studies across other provinces and school types would extend the generalisability of the findings reported here.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The following eight open-ended questions constituted the final interview guide. The guide was piloted with two EFAL teachers from a school not included in the main sample, and revised before data collection, as described in Section 4.3.

1. Can you describe the most common punctuation errors you observe in your EFAL learners' written work?

2. In your view, what factors contribute to these punctuation errors? Please be as specific as possible.

3. How does learners' use of isiXhosa as a home language affect their punctuation in English writing? Can you give examples from your marking?

4. How do classroom conditions, such as class size, available resources, and time allocation, affect your ability to address learners' punctuation challenges?

5. How do you typically provide feedback on learners' punctuation errors, and how do learners respond to that feedback?

6. What role do you believe reading habits and exposure to written English play in learners' punctuation development?

7a. How do you think learners' use of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp and social media affects the way they approach punctuation in formal academic writing?

7b. What curriculum or institutional support, if any, do you receive for addressing learners' punctuation challenges?

8. What additional support or resources would help you more effectively address EFAL learners' punctuation challenges in your classroom?

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The authors used the generative AI tool Grammarly exclusively for language editing and grammatical improvement during manuscript preparation. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, results, or conclusions of the manuscript. All AI-assisted output was reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this paper. AI-assisted tools were not used to create or modify any images or figures in this manuscript.

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