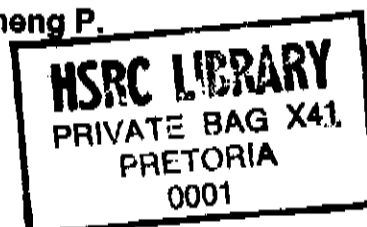


**Assessing Communicative Language Ability in IsiXhosa and Sepedi
languages of South Africa Languages**

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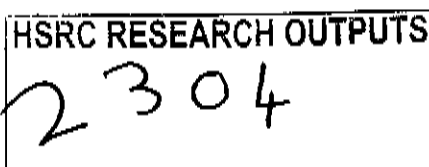
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Assessing communicative language ability in IsiXhosa and Sepedi languages of South Africa languages

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Abstract

Background

After the democratic elections of 1994 the South African Government has shown commitment to develop indigenous languages to the same status as English and Afrikaans. However, Government's efforts are being frustrated by poor training of educators, use of inappropriate teaching and assessment techniques and lack of resources and commitment by institutions to develop the critical competencies in languages such as communicative language ability. Although there have been some efforts to promote and develop indigenous South African languages through assessment, the methods employed have continued to be paper and pencil examinations. Little effort has been made to assess oral competency as an important component of the assessment models applied. This paper discusses the results of a study conducted on communicative language ability on a sample of Grade 9 learners and educators of IsiXhosa and Sepedi in South Africa.

Aims of the study

- To develop assessment instruments based on the assessment criteria and performance indicators of language assessment in C2005/OBE, particularly the language skills of speaking, reading and listening.
- To determine the level of proficiency in IsiXhosa and Sepedi languages in speaking, reading and listening.
- To determine the psychometric characteristics of the assessment instruments developed.
- To determine the influence of some learner and educator factors on oral proficiency.

Methodology

A sample of ten schools was drawn from the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and the Mpumalanga provinces. It comprised 408 learners and 23 educators. Multiple research methods were used to collect the pertinent information. These were causal comparative (post hoc) to gather information about educator and learner variables, focus group discussion for assessment of speaking skills and administration of tests and performance language tasks to assess reading and listening skills respectively. Assessment instruments were developed to assess skills in speaking, reading and listening in both IsiXhosa and Sepedi. A questionnaire was also developed to collect information on learner and educator attributes.

Results and Conclusions

Mean performance in reading in both languages was generally better than in listening. When compared to the specific outcomes in the learning area: Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC), mean performance was poorest in the specific outcome that requires learners to respond to aesthetic, affective, cultural and social values. Performance in schools in regions where other African languages are used performed relatively poor especially in the speaking competence.

The following are some of the findings and recommendations of the study. Essential learning resource materials for teaching and assessing communicative language ability were either lacking, inadequate or of low quality. Educators provided inadequate learning opportunities for the two African languages and as such learners were less proficient in speaking and listening skills than in reading. Educators involved learners in assessment activities that did not adequately assess and improve the communicative language skills. Most educators in the sample did not use appropriate assessment methods in assessing various language skills. Although a large proportion of educators had undergone some professional training, they were weak in appropriate pedagogical and assessment strategies for improving performance in African languages. Courses offered in teacher training colleges and other higher education institutions should be reviewed for their relevance in impacting the desired skills for teaching and assessing African languages especially in communicative language skills. Both learners and educators viewed African languages favourably. Learning of the languages was considered useful for learning other subjects and for use in life after school.

Introduction

The issues of language in South Africa was addressed with the advent of the new democratic government in 1994 by declaring Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Sepedi, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, IsiXhosa and Zulu as the eleven official languages in South Africa. The current language policy specifies that any South African may have access to his or her preferred language in all spheres of public life, including the administration of justice, the public service, labour relations, education etc. The government also formed the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), a statutory body that was mandated to further advance the promotion, development and use of African languages. There are other organizations besides PANSALB that have made a commitment to promoting African languages through assessment.

Nkabinde *et al.* (1996: 147) noted that since 1992 the Independent Examination Board (IEB) has extensively been involved in consultation, research, development and implementation of assessment models at Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Levels 1, 2 and 3. The status of languages within the assessment model is an important focus of IEB work, and is beginning to have an impact on assessment practices across the country. Another organization that has been involved in the promotion of African languages is the Foundation for Education, Science and Technology (FEST) that originally developed tests for use in Language Olympiads to promote only two languages, namely Afrikaans and English. This has now changed and FEST started to assess African languages in Grades 11 and 12. However, the methods of assessing African languages employed by these organizations continue to be paper and pencil examinations. No efforts have been made to assess communicative language ability or oral competency as an important component of language assessment models.

Teaching of African Languages

African languages in South Africa are used as medium of instruction and assessment across the curriculum in the Foundation Phase. But in the Senior Phases, African languages are taught as school subjects only in the learning field of Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC). Teaching is aimed at grammatical competence rather than communicative competence. Inappropriate instructional strategies have also been employed in the teaching of African languages that have led to mass failure at the Senior Certificate Level. Nokaneng (1986:177) argues that the methods educators use are not didactically accountable and in most cases, are methods that are borrowed from second language approaches and no prominence is given to communicative skills. Educators of African languages are disadvantaged in fulfilling their didactic functions efficiently and enthusiastically because of poor academic and professional training in the languages coupled with negative attitudes towards the subject. Nokaneng further points out that African languages were taught in training colleges and universities in a language that failed to enhance the status of the African languages.

Assessment of African languages

The teaching of African languages is examination-oriented and not for the purposes of communication or comprehension. Naidoo *et al.* (1998:12) argues that a large proportion of our schools do not give students enough practice in:

- Reading, that is, in developing critical, selective, analytic and interpretative reading skills and
- Writing, that is, in developing critical, creative, interpretative, reflective, analytical and transactional writing skills.

Learners who study an African language as their primary language lack opportunities to practice and are thus disadvantaged because they have little incentive to develop these critical tools of learning. Since the examinations tend not to assess these skills, they are unlikely to be taught or developed. Little has been done to assess oral competencies of the African languages.

Why proficiency in primary language is important

The term "proficiency" is defined as having sufficient command of the language for a particular purpose. Groot (1975: 48) defines proficiency tests as measuring knowledge, insight and skills irrespective of a particular syllabus. In other words, the emphasis on proficiency testing is on determining the learner's ability to operate effectively in real life language use situations.

Chamberlain (1989) conducted a study in South Africa on testing proficiency in reading and listening skills in English at Grades 4, 5 and 6. The findings were that African learners using English as medium of instruction generally did not respond to the inputs. Avoidance strategies were used and few oral performance tasks were attempted (Barry *et al.* 1996: 40). This implies that the learners lacked oral skills in their mother tongue and were therefore unable to transfer skills to the second language in order to understand it.

Promotion of proficiency in primary language is important because of its vital role in transferring skills into a second language. Naidoo *et al.* (1998: 43) supported the idea that acquiring skills through one's primary language and then using them in the second (for example, by studying subjects through that medium) is actually more effective than the traditional methods of teaching a second language. Research suggests that it is extremely ineffective to attempt to develop skills through a second or additional language. African primary languages are ineffectively used as a vehicle for the promotion of the critical skills. Primary language represents a resource reflecting what the learner already knows. It assists in the development of content organisation and details, it allows the writer to access appropriate lexical items and phrases to consolidate relationships across languages, and permits more sophisticated thinking on issues. To effectively develop the African languages suitable and relevant assessment techniques should be identified especially in the area of oral proficiency.

The study of communicative language ability (also referred to as oral proficiency) was conducted in two indigenous African languages, namely IsiXhosa and Sepedi. These languages belong to two different groups of languages. In South Africa, African languages are divided into four groups, the Nguni group which consist of IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu and Siswati, the Sotho group which comprises Setswana, Southern Sotho and Sepedi and the two languages which do not fall within either of these groups, Venda and Tsonga. IsiXhosa and Sepedi represent the two main groups and statistically the population of IsiXhosa and Sepedi speakers is large when compared to the other groups, excluding IsiZulu. The research findings of this study could be extended to other African languages. A study focused on the assessment, especially of oral proficiency of these languages would be a positive step towards the improvement of teaching and learning of African languages.

This study took the form of a performance assessment at Grade 9, which is the beginning of the Senior phase of the General Education and Training Band and is the last phase of the General Education and Training Certificate as identified by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Learners at this stage are increasingly able to reason independently about concrete materials and experience. They are able to engage in open argument and are willing to accept multiple solutions to a single problem.

The first phase involved an in-depth review of the outcomes specified for language learning in the new OBE curriculum and an overview of research issues in the field of language

testing. This discussion informed the process of developing the instruments. The study also explored theoretical models of communicative language ability with respect to oral proficiency in terms of the OBE curriculum at Grade 9 level.

Theoretical framework

The study employed the model of communicative language ability postulated by Bachman (1990), which is based on theoretical as well as empirical work in determining Communicative Language Ability (CLA). The CLA model includes three interacting components: language competence, strategic competence and psycho physiological mechanisms. Language competence consists of two traits, organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence, in turn, includes grammatical and textual competence. Pragmatic competence subsumes illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. These components are further broken down to provide a more detailed description of the construct of communicative language ability (Bachman 1990:87). Skehan (1991:9) recommends Bachman's model as being of pivotal importance by saying:

“... it is both theoretically well-founded and comprehensive. The model has been subject to empirical data validation and it contains within itself a concern with the competence-performance relationship.”

It can be deduced from the afore-mentioned statement that Bachman's model could be used for testing and analysing proficiency in Sepedi and IsiXhosa languages.

Outcomes for Learning Area Language Literacy and Communication (LLC) as Specified by Outcomes-Based Education

The language outcomes are directed at an “ideal language user” in that they relate to all languages and all levels of language learning. The multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of language can hardly be expressed as a set of linear statements as found in rationale, outcomes and assessment criteria. Different language outcomes tend to overlap. The function of an outcome is to emphasise a certain feature of language activity (Curriculum 2005 1997:26). Language outcomes are divided into seven specific outcomes, as is explained in Curriculum 2005, (1997).

The various competencies in communicative language ability contained in the Bachman model are related to the OBE specific outcomes stipulated in the learning field of Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC). The Bachman model and the specific outcomes were used in the identification and formulation of appropriate text, questions and assessment tasks for assessing reading, listening and speaking skills. A unified theoretical framework for characterising the nature and properties of language proficiency advocated in terms of the outcomes-based curriculum is essential for both teaching and testing language proficiency.

Aims of the study

The instructional and assessment strategies used in African languages are inadequate to empower the learners with critical, selective, analytic and interpretative skills. Although an oral examination is a requirement of the African languages' syllabi no guidelines are given on the following issues:

- Length of the given text;
- Aspects to focus on in the text;
- Types of questions to be asked;
- Topics to address in free conversation;
- Weighting of different sections of the test when scoring;

- Rating of accuracy and fluency as compared to understanding of themes and content of the text;
- Determining levels of proficiency.

No clear guidance exists for the content and assessment of performance in the oral tests, but in line with the tradition, educators interview learners on a passage from a novel studied in class. The syllabus does not take sufficient account of the actual capacity and needs of both learners and educators and this leads to confusion and uncertainty. Even within the framework of the new curriculum (Curriculum 2005) no real guidelines are provided for oral proficiency testing other than lists of performance indicators and assessment criteria for each specific outcome and the requirements of levels of complexity (Senior Phase Policy Document 1997:11-43).

Related to the lack of guidelines is the lack of literacy materials such as specialist dictionaries, glossaries, post-literacy reading materials, popular magazines and journals. The problem is further exacerbated by the scarcity of well-trained experts such as terminologists and terminographers, trainers of translators and interpreters, educators and competent trainers of literacy facilitators who are first language speakers of the languages concerned. This has hampered the development of African languages and has had a negative impact on oral proficiency.

Other educators' and learners' variables that influence learners' oral proficiency in African languages include linguistic backgrounds, for example, the influence of Sesotho on IsiXhosa in the Aliwal North region of the Eastern Cape province and that of Siswati and IsiNdebele on Sepedi in the Mpumalanga Province. Learners' abilities in writing and some aspects of grammar also influence their oral proficiency. Lack of proficiency in reading, speaking and listening skills could have a negative impact in their performance both in these languages and in other subjects. In light of the scanty research information on assessment of African languages the study endeavours to achieve the following aims:

- To develop assessment instruments based on the assessment criteria and performance indicators of language assessment in C2005/OBE, particularly the language skills of speaking, reading and listening;
- To determine the level of proficiency in IsiXhosa and Sepedi languages in speaking, reading and listening;
- To determine the psychometric characteristics of the assessment instruments developed;
- To determine the influence of some learner and educator factors on oral proficiency.

Method

Research Design

Multiple research methods were used such as a causal comparative (post hoc) approach for collecting information about educators' and learners' variables, focus group discussions for assessment of speaking skills and ordinary administration of tests to assess reading and listening skills. These methods were considered appropriate given the diversity of information required to answer the research questions. The work involved in assessing listening and speaking skills require highly qualified and experienced African language specialists and would be expensive and time consuming. Thus a manageable sample of five schools for each language was considered reasonable. However, based on the results of this study a larger sample and more African languages could be studied in the future.

Description of the Sample

To achieve the aims of the project some ten schools with Grade 9 classes were selected for an intensive study. Efforts were made to ensure good representation of schools by using such variables as region and type of schools. A total of four schools were randomly selected

from the Eastern Cape which is a predominantly IsiXhosa speaking area and four from the Northern Province which is a predominantly Sepedi speaking area. To determine the influence of other languages on oral proficiency of IsiXhosa and Sepedi, two schools were also selected from areas that are regarded as multi-lingual, for example, Mpumalanga Province (one school) and the Aliwal North district in the Eastern Cape (one school).

In each selected school one Grade 9 class of about 35 learners was randomly selected, resulting in about 350 learners in the sample. All the educators of IsiXhosa and Sepedi, in the selected schools participated in the research project. This provided about 23 educators for the study. Data was collected by researchers from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and fieldworkers who were trained to administer the sub-tests and to rate the performances in speaking on a systematic rating scale.

Development of instruments for oral proficiency

Three assessment instruments, that is, reading, listening and speaking, for oral proficiency were developed to test a variety of speech styles. In developing the assessment tasks for the three instruments three of the specific outcomes for the learning area, Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC) were used. The specific outcomes were as specified by Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) and included:

Specific Outcome 1: Learners make and negotiate meaning and understanding

Knowledge is acquired and used through negotiation and discussions. This view is supported by socio-cognitive approaches to learning, which argue that knowledge is best acquired through negotiated interaction. According to this view, students will develop as writers more effectively as they engage in transactions over their own texts and texts of others – negotiating real intentions to communication with real audience expectations (Grabe and Kaplan 1996: 380). Learners should interact through conversation and discussions. Sharing of ideas, collaboration and co-operation need to be developed to promote negotiation and interaction.

Specific Outcome 3: Learners respond to the aesthetic, affective, cultural and social values

The aspect of aesthetics refers to spontaneous admiration for everything that is truly beautiful and admirable. It enriches man's existence and it is not only given to artistic men, but it is also important for everybody who wishes to lead a balanced and meaningful life. Learners need to be able to analyse and interpret social values and appreciate the aesthetic and affective value of texts. In many courses, students are expected to read literature or philosophy and to provide an insightful interpretation of what the texts mean to them. This is typically a difficult genre to master since it often presumes a wide range of background knowledge, a finely honed sense of intertextuality, an ability to read on multiple levels and recognise symbolic structure in a text and knowledge of how critical theory is used in interpretation.

Specific Outcome 6: Learners use language for learning

Language is the means by which cognition is developed and expressed; the means by which all knowledge is acquired and expressed. To a certain extent all learning is dependent on mastery of language. This means that language has tremendous educational significance. Language can be regarded as a fundamental condition for the total development of man. Nearly everything that man learns in his life is dependent on his mastery of language. School activities and the child's mental development require skills in language.

Our knowledge and understanding of the child's intellectual, emotional and volitional life is grounded in his proficiency in understanding and using language. This indicates that people cannot think without language in its most basic form. People communicate through language. People express their feelings, thoughts and emotions through language. This outcome is used across the curriculum.

The use of specific outcomes for LLC and the Bachman's model as the criteria for the development of assessment tasks should be done with caution because components within each of the two frameworks overlap making it difficult to develop an item that measures only one specific outcome.

Instruments for assessing oral proficiency

Items were developed for assessing reading skills on two literal texts and on one visual text for both languages. There were 25 multiple choice format items covering mostly three specific outcomes. Experienced educators, test developers and authors of learning materials for the specific languages developed assessment instruments for listening skills. High quality cassettes were recorded at the UNISA Studios. Texts (or passages) were recorded twice to ensure that they would be clearly audible and well understood. Learners were required to respond to questions relating to each passage. Then the next passage was played and related questions answered. In total there were fifteen open-ended questions. Each of the questions was worth two points for a complete answer, one for a partially complete answer and zero for a wrong answer. Thus the maximum total test score for this instrument was thirty.

To assess speaking skills, learners were given a controversial aspect of the topic on HIV/AIDS for discussion. In each school learners were divided into four groups and asked to discuss the topic. Each group had to select a scribe and a reporter. They were given fifteen minutes for brainstorming and discussion. Each group reporter was given ten minutes to make a presentation to the class. Once all the presentations had been made a class discussion was held on the major issues of the topic. It was during this class discussion that scoring (rating) was done using a holistic scoring procedure.

After the development of the assessment instruments a pilot study was conducted using 30 learners and 12 educators. The tests were scored and analysed for clarity, content, discrimination and level of difficulty. The relevance of the various items in the tests to some specific outcomes was also assessed. It was found that most of the questions were very difficult. These were either moderated or replaced with items measuring some low cognitive skills such as recall so that the whole range of a learner's ability was catered for. It was also discovered that the quality of sound of the audiocassette was not as good as expected and resulted in some learners performing poorly in the listening test. These issues were noted and were rectified during the main study.

Both learners' and educators' questionnaires were analysed for clarity of instructions and questions. Some minor changes were made. All the instruments were provided for, in both languages.

Analysis and results

Psychometric characteristics of the assessment instruments

Among the most essential characteristics of a good measurement instrument are validity and reliability. The validity of a test is the extent to which the test measures what it is supposed to measure. Thus validity of the test depends on the purpose of its use. Various terms are used to describe types of test validity (e.g. content, concurrent, predictive and construct validity). A test may not be valid for all purposes but must be valid for the purpose for which it is being used. The use of agreed criteria in terms of content and specific outcomes for language at the end of Grade 9 ensured content validity. Construct validity was measured during the pilot study when judges checked the items in both the reading and listening tests against the specified specific outcomes and levels of difficulty. Some items were revised or moderated at this stage for use in the main study.

The issue of test bias is important when considering the validity of a test. A test is biased if students' scores depend on something other than what is being tested. Although tests for the two languages were developed using the same criteria they differed in content and therefore were not comparable in terms of the level of performance. Bias of the items was not considered critical given that the tests were not translated forms of other tests in different languages but were constructed from materials and situations that were relevant to each group of learners using the specific outcomes of languages at Grade 9.

Reliability is the consistency with which a test measures whatever it is measuring. A test could be very reliable, that is, a similar score is obtained on repeated uses, and still not be valid for its intended purpose. A test cannot be valid without being reliable. Reliability is usually indexed with a decimal fraction that ranges from .00 to 1.00. The larger the index, the smaller the error present in the measurement. A simple rule of thumb would be to use test reliabilities of 0.70 or higher for making group decisions and 0.90 or higher for making individual decisions.

The test reliability coefficients of the reading and the listening tests were computed using conventional test theory available in MICROCAT program. The reliability coefficients of the various tests and languages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients of reading and listening tests

Number of Learners	204	204	204	204
Number Items (Score)	25(25)	15(30)	25(25)	15(30)
Mean	12.1	16	16.6	13
Std Deviation	2.8	4.8	3.5	5.2
Alpha Coefficients	0.43	0.56	0.65	0.67

The seemingly low reliability coefficients could be attributed to the wide variability in learner performance in the tests. The reliability coefficients of the reading and the listening tests, are practically acceptable given the length and format of the test items.

The reliability coefficient of the speaking test was difficult to establish given the holistic nature of the scoring technique used. However, two researcher and the field worker did the scoring of the discussion and an average for each school was computed.

Oral proficiency scores

Descriptive analysis of reading and listening test scores by specific outcomes measured is presented in Table 2 and 3. It is evident that scores in reading were lowest in schools where multi-lingual with other African languages was practised across the three specific outcomes. However, scores on listening test seemed not to follow the same pattern.

Table2: Descriptive analysis of the reading scores by specific outcome

1 ^{1*}	55	13.8	38	11.4	50	15.1	49	11.1
2 ¹	56	11.5	42	11.6	52	13.3	54	9.3
3 ¹	54	10.8	37	11.6	49	14.3	51	9.4
4 ^{1*}	48	14.1	32	10.9	38	15.5	43	10.8
5 ²	76	13.3	74	14.8	84	19.5	72	14.0
6 ²	65	14.6	67	15.3	77	24.7	62	14.6
7 ²	71	16.0	70	15.7	75	20.4	68	15.7
8 ²	75	14.0	73	10.2	83	16.9	71	10.3
9 ^{2*}	65	12.7	65	9.9	74	17.4	61	9.8

Table3: Descriptive analysis of the scores for the listening test by specific outcome

1 ^{1*}	51	17.2	36	26.4	46	16.5	46	12.1
2 ¹	53	16.4	42	21.8	50	14.0	52	9.8
3 ¹	75	13.8	42	21.7	64	13.0	55	12.7
4 ^{1*}	49	16.1	42	19.6	47	13.9	45	9.9
5 ²	45	18.8	61	24.2	51	17.0	59	16.9
6 ²	38	18.5	41	19.3	39	16.2	49	13.5
7 ²	40	17.6	57	19.1	47	14.6	57	12.8
8 ²	50	19.4	48	17.7	49	15.7	60	8.0
9 ^{2*}	31	18.8	42	24.6	36	18.2	46	13.3

Legend

- 1 Schools that had IsiXhosa as primary language
- 2 Schools that had Sepedi as primary language
- * Schools where there was influence by other language
- RSO1 Specific outcome 1 in Reading test
- RSO3 Specific outcome 3 in Reading test
- RSO6 Specific outcome 6 in Reading test
- LSO1 Specific outcome 1 in listening test
- LSO3 Specific outcome 3 in listening test
- Rtotal Percent score of reading test
- Ltotal Percent score of listening test

The mean performance in reading was generally better than in the listening in both languages. Mean performance was poorest in the LSO3 in listening with only two schools achieving a mean score of at least 50 percent. Performance in schools in the regions where other languages were used performed relatively poor. This indicated that there was some influence on communicative language ability by other African languages on the learning of IsiXhosa and Sepedi.

Assessment of speaking skills

A holistic approach to assessing speaking skills was used. Holistic scoring procedures use a single set of scoring criteria that has been developed and a single score is assigned to represent the whole domain. Holistic scoring is subjective and the scores are based on a numerical scale ranging anywhere from 1-9. The numbers on the scale are often described briefly as specifications on a scoring rubric. When holistic scores are used efforts are made to socialise a rater to the ways raters assign grades and their rationale for doing so. This anchoring constitutes an important support for generating consistently reliable scoring. In this study holistic scoring procedures were employed in scoring the discussion for speaking skills. To increase reliability of the scores two researchers did the scoring of each discussion session and the average rating score was used in the analysis.

The results are reported at the schools level. In three of the schools (1 IsiXhosa, 2 Sepedi) learners used appropriate register and tone for the situation and the task. The work lacked some coherence. There was little use of effective idioms or suitable cohesion devices. The level of proficiency in speaking was rated average. In four of the schools (2 IsiXhosa, 2 Sepedi) the message was clearly conveyed with occasional gaps and redundancies. Learners used appropriate register and linguistic cohesion with only occasional inaccuracies. They had an ability to employ emotive and figurative language. The level of proficiency in speaking was rated above average. Finally, in two of the schools (1 IsiXhosa, 1 Sepedi) where other African languages were commonly used, argument was lacking in fluency although the learners used appropriate register and tone for the task. Poor use of cohesive devices was evident. Although there were several lexical and grammatical errors the task still allowed for basic communication. The level of proficiency in speaking was rated below average.

Although, questions could be raised about the reliability of the holistic approach there is evidence in the literature that recommends it for the assessment of writing and communicative (oral) skills such as speaking. The reliability could be improved by having more judges doing the scoring and then determining the inter-rater reliability. This is possible where a large sample is used.

The results of the reading, listening and speaking tests are comparable when considered at the school level. On average performance on the reading tasks was better than in the other tasks but there was consistency in performance in that schools that did well did so consistently in all the assessment tasks while those that did poorly did so in all three assessment tasks. The acquisition of these skills is linked and could be improved simultaneously.

Factors influencing performance in communicative language ability

Information on the factors that influenced performance in communicative language ability was gathered through questionnaires administered to both the learners and the educators.

Learning/teaching materials

Lack of learning/teaching materials hampers the teaching and learning of communicative language skills. The results indicated that most of the learning/teaching resource materials were inadequate and of poor quality.

It was evident that learning activities frequently used were group work and the use of practical events. However, a large proportion of educators were still practising traditional methods of lecturing in teaching language.

Attitude towards African languages

Attitudes of learners and educators towards a given school subject have been found to impact on performance in that subject. Learners and educators were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with some statements regarding attitudes and motivation. A 4-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was used. The results indicated that both learners and educators had positive attitude towards studying and teaching of African languages as opposed to the common belief that learners and educators do not like African languages. However, there were mixed results regarding the usefulness of African language in the work place. While 66 percent of all the learners indicated that the African languages were not relevant in the work place, all the educators of both IsiXhosa and Sepedi agreed that being competent in the two languages was useful to the work place.

Assessment practices

A variety of assessment activities are used to assess communicative language ability. Traditional paper and pencil tests can only assess a small number of language skills. Other methods such as class presentations, debates, reading passages aloud and oral tests have been found useful in assessing reading, listening and speaking skills. Learners indicated, on a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "always", how often they were involved in some given assessment activities. The majority of learners studying either IsiXhosa or Sepedi as their primary language were often involved in paper and pencil tests, class debates, oral tests, and writing of composition or essays. However, about 45 percent indicated that they were hardly involved in class presentations, reading passages aloud to other learners, writing a critique on a passages or text and listening to passage read in the language. It was evident that certain important assessment activities for measuring communicative language ability were not being practised as often as they should.

Although some of the educators for both languages had appropriate assessment practices for communicative language ability, a large proportion of them still practised the traditional paper and pencil form of assessment. About a third of the educators of IsiXhosa rarely involved learners in the writing of compositions or essays which could be responsible for the lower test scores in the reading test as compared to the Sepedi educators, the majority of whom involved learners in the writing of compositions or essays. About 59 percent of educators of Sepedi hardly assessed learners' oral proficiency, which could be responsible for lower test scores in listening, and speaking compared to the IsiXhosa learners.

There seems to be a lot of confusion among the educators regarding the most appropriate method(s) of assessment of oral language skill. A moderate proportion of the educators used some appropriate methods in assessing the various language skills. However, it was worrying to find that 67 percent of educators of IsiXhosa and 29 percent of Sepedi used written tests to measure oral skills and listening skills respectively. Another striking finding was that educators of IsiXhosa neither used class presentations to assess oral competence and speaking skills nor drama to assess listening skills. A summary of the results is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of the language skills and methods used for assessment

Vocabulary	√	√			√		√	√	√	√
Reading comprehension			√		√	√	√	√	√	√
Grammar	√	√				√	√	√	√	√
Writing	√	√			√					
Oral skills	√		√	√	√	√		√	√	√
Listening		√		√			√	√	√	√
Speaking					√	√		√	√	√

√ indicated the skill and method used to assess the language

XH IsiXhosa

SE Sepedi

Educator Characteristics

Certain educator characteristics are critical for effective functioning of the educator in developing communicative language ability skills. Educators' academic and professional training and teaching experience have been found to influence learners' academic performance. About 67 percent of the educators of IsiXhosa and only 30 percent Sepedi had at least a bachelor's degree. Furthermore 70 percent of the Sepedi had attained Standard 10 with 2 to 4 years of teacher training. Most educators had taught the particular African language during most of their teaching career because their total teaching experience did not differ much from their teaching experience in the particular language.

Classroom characteristics

Class size influences the way the instructional process is conducted especially in communicative language ability. Class sizes varied greatly but they were generally large ranging from 16 to 115 with a mean of 65 and standard deviation of 31 for learners of Sepedi while for learners of IsiXhosa ranged from 39 to 80 with a mean of 54 learners and standard deviation of 15. The number of educators of Sepedi in the school ranged from 0 to 9 with a mean of 5 and a standard deviation of 3 and that of IsiXhosa ranged from 5 to 8 with a mean of 6 and standard deviation of 1. These results provide a learner/teacher ratio of about 13 for Sepedi and 9 for IsiXhosa. Although the variability of these ratios may be very wide they give an indication of moderately small classes for the two languages that are appropriate for teaching of communicative language ability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The specific outcomes for learning area of LLC reflect a communicative language ability component. Communicative language ability (CLA) advocates the promotion of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, which are inter-linked. Important competencies for assessing CLA are stipulated in Bachman's model. An integration of the theoretical models and the specific outcomes is essential for formulating guidelines for teaching and assessing communicative language ability.

Speaking activities should ideally arise from listening to what others have to say, talking about what has been read and discussing one's own and others' writing. Listening skills

should not be developed in isolation, but rather in conjunction with other skills. Learners should have the ability to understand and speak language in such a way that communication is effective. Learners' awareness of the context and purpose needs to be sharpened so that they can cope with situations of greater complexity. The specific outcomes of LLC demand that learners develop their oral proficiency by mastering language skills, composing skills and speaking skills and sharing a responsible attitude towards other speakers.

Reading should contribute to a learner's overall communicative ability. Learners should be exposed to a variety of texts such as letters, short stories, poems, advertisements, newspaper articles, reports, minutes etc. Learners' sensitivity regarding the form, style and intention of spoken and written texts should be developed. In teaching literature that is contentious, sensitive or stereotypical educators should teach in a way, which will contribute to the development of critical awareness and help to equip learners with strategies for dealing with diverse opinions on a variety of issues.

Learners should have opportunities to express themselves in more formal ways as required by a given context for a specific purpose and audience. This involves interpretation of the topic and giving direction to the development of the writing. Learners should be able to plan, draft, edit, revise and polish their own work before presenting it. They are required to demonstrate their grammatical competence and to be aware of how language structures are used.

Teaching of communicative language ability

Clearly there has been a paradigm shift in the teaching of language. Although a communicative approach has been used in the teaching of English and Afrikaans, the approach used in African languages has been a structural one with emphasis on phonetics, phonology and morphology. As Netshilata (1999) noted there is no contextualisation in the teaching of African languages and this does not promote communication. There is a need for the use of a communicative approach in the teaching of African languages. Such a paradigm shift has implications for the nature of teaching and the assessment strategies used for IsiXhosa and Sepedi. Educators will have to upgrade their teaching and learning strategies. Teaching should emphasise new progressive strategies such as co-operative learning, direct opportunities to construct knowledge and understanding, and performance assessment that taps learners' conceptual development rather than the mastery of rote knowledge. The teaching of IsiXhosa and Sepedi should address itself specifically to the need for the mastery of speaking, writing, listening and reading through an explicit knowledge of the structure of IsiXhosa and Sepedi. The emphasis should not be on mastery of grammatical rules but on how to apply language structures and conventions in context. It is recommended that educators provide appropriate opportunities for learners to practice communication language ability skills such as listening and speaking. This could be achieved by encouraging learners to read and provide them with reading materials in African languages.

Assessment of communicative language ability

Assessment should be concerned with what is successfully communicated rather than with what has been acquired through rote learning. Assessment is an important strategy for promoting language learning in schools. An effective language assessment programme must be linguistically principled, explicit, criterion-referenced and must inform different types of assessment including diagnostic, formative and summative assessment.

Assessment of writing should include assessment of compositions, writing for specific purposes and specific skills. Assessment of listening and speaking skills should give substantial weight to inferential comprehension and should take cognisance of the learner's ability to understand and respond appropriately to what has been said or read, also with

respect to discussions of works in the reading programme. Educators should use different strategies of assessment such as performance assessment, peer assessment and alternative assessments such as self-assessment and conferencing. Educators should provide guidelines and checklists to facilitate peer and self-assessment. Learners should know the purpose of assessment and what is to be assessed. To promote oral proficiency, assessment of the various oral competencies should be done frequently.

The importance of communicative language ability requires no further emphasis. It is recommended that communicative language ability be a major component in assessment at classroom level and in examinations at the exit points of the education system. Communicative language skills should be explicitly explained in instructional and assessment materials and in guidelines for educators. Being an important component in language, communicative language ability should be made compulsory in African languages' syllabi. There is a need for developing standardization criteria that will be used in the assessment and weighting of the various components of language across all African languages. According to Oberholzer (1999) such standardization should provide guidelines on how to identify skills or outcomes to be developed, the weighting of each language component in relation to the whole learning area, the modes of assessment of each component, and finally the moderation options.

Training through in-service could be used to equip educators with the appropriate assessment practices for language. Educators should use the appropriate equipment, assessment tasks and activities in assessing the various communicative language skills. Such assessment tasks should be contextualised and geared to testing higher order cognitive skills.

Attitude towards African languages

Both the learners and educators showed a positive attitude towards learning the two languages. This is an issue that can be exploited by educators to improve the general performance of learners. Lack of learning resources in schools seems to affect African languages. The relevance of the resource materials requires critical review to ensure that they cater for appropriate approaches to the teaching, learning and assessment of the African languages.

Contrary to what has been said about learners' and educators' attitude towards and interest in African languages, there was evidence that both learners and educators of IsiXhosa and Sepedi viewed these languages favourably. They also considered learning of the African languages as useful for learning other subjects and for future use in life after school. Given the poor performance in these languages at Senior Certificate level it is recommended that educators should capitalise on the positive attitude and interest to improve performance in the African languages.

Limitations of the study

A number of factors delimited the various processes in this study from the original conceptualisation of the investigation to the actual data collection and analysis. First, due to lack of documented information on assessment models for African languages most of the literature that was reviewed was on studies of English language, but efforts were made to include only the relevant ones. Second, the sample used was small and focused only on two African languages and may not be sufficient to draw inferences about the teaching and assessment of African languages in general. It is recommended that a large-scale study be designed at national level that will include most of the African languages. Results from such a study could assist in the shaping of a language policy regarding teaching and assessment of the African languages.

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APPENDIX C

Holistic Scoring Schedule for Speaking skills

The following aspects need consideration when evaluating the oral competence

1. Fluency appropriate register and tone for the situation or task: linguistic cohesion; ease of expression.
2. Grammar: correct use of words, phrases, sentence structure, punctuation.
3. Vocabulary: appropriate, originality, ability to employ emotive and figurative language.
4. Content correct and apt response to give assignment, richness and logical flow of thoughts and arguments.
5. Mechanics spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, format.

The following scales adapted from the Pergamon General Scales, were used to rate speaking competence.

9-point scale

9	EXPERT SPEAKER. Fully effective handling of speaking for all required tasks	Very Good
8	VERY GOOD SPEAKER. Very nearly at full competence level	Good
7	GOOD SPEAKER. Message effectively conveyed on suitable scale. Clear presentation, complete coverage of topic and logical outline. Speaking clear and flow maintained. Use of cohesive devices good and style appropriate. Accurate grammar, vocabulary and spelling apart from slips.	Above average
6	COMPETENT SPEAKER. Message fully conveyed with occasional gaps and/or redundancies. Flows reasonably well. Speaking style acceptable with only occasional inaccuracies. Transitions not always smooth. Usage and pronunciation conform fairly well to accepted norms.	High Average
5	MODEST SPEAKER. Although broadly conveying the message, the structure and flow of the work is somewhat lacking in coherence. Little use of effective idiom or suitable cohesive devices. The work has some errors in usage. Pronunciation not always perfect.	Average
4	MARGINAL SPEAKER. Conveys simple short messages but with longer tasks there are gaps and deficiencies in treatment. Presentation lacking in fluency. Poor speaking style, use of punctuation and use of cohesive devices. Little style or appropriate use of idioms. Several errors in usage, marginal standards in pronunciation. Still allow basic communication.	Low Average
3	LIMITED SPEAKER. Produces a string of sentences bearing on the topic, but of little interest or logical structure. Poor speaker, punctuation and cohesion and lack of uniform style. Many lexical and grammatical errors. Poor pronunciation. Main feature is that the topic under discussion can be just discerned.	Below Average
2	EXTREMELY LIMITED SPEAKER. Only a rough mastery of the language. Can speak several recognisable words and phrases. The message is neither comprehensive nor ordered.	Poor
1	INTERMITTENT SPEAKER. Able to produce a few words and phrases. Conveys no message. Cannot communicate ideas	Very poor