

# **Towards a framework for accommodating linguistic diversity among learners in large-scale assessments: lessons learnt from the WCED Grade 8 assessment study**

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**Matthews M Makgamatha (HSRC, Pretoria)**

**Kathleen Heugh (University of South Australia, Adelaide)**

**Cas H Prinsloo (HSRC, Pretoria)**

**Lolita Winnaar (HSRC, Pretoria)**

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# Background to the Study

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- **The study was conducted during 2006 at the request of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED).**
- **HSRC was contracted to conduct the study.**
- **The study was a province-wide assessment of all Grade 8 students in schools under the WCED.**
- **Each student in the system was assessed for his/her achievement in language and mathematics.**

**The study should be viewed against the proliferation of large-scale assessments/evaluations in South Africa.**

- **Basic Education Ministry (e.g. Systemic Evaluation Studies at Grades 3, 6 & 9)**
- **Education development or school improvement studies conducted by NGOs / research organisation (e.g. AMI-DDSP, QLP)**
- **International / transnational comparative studies (e.g. TIMSS, PIRLS, MLA & SACMEQ)**
- **Treatment of linguistic diversity in local or SA large-scale assessment studies in varies:**
  - **Accommodation of students' linguistic diversity.**
  - **Linguistic diversity handled in a manner convenient to the system or implementing agency.**

# Rationale for the Study

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- **Conduct a province-wide assessment of Grade 8 students achievement in language and mathematics.**
- **To use data obtained from the study to:**
  - International benchmark the performance of WCED Grade 8 students,
  - Prioritise learners with potential,
  - Develop and support learning and teaching processes, and
  - Produce reports for the province, each Education Management Development Centre (EMDC), individual schools and individual students.

# Requirements of the WCED

- **All Grade 8 students in the province (i.e. ±75 000 students in 520 schools) be assessed.**
- **The assessment be aligned to National Curriculum Statement (NCS) at Grade 8 level in terms of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards (DoE, 2002).**
- **Measure learner performance in mathematics and language at Grade 8 level.**
- **Instruments able to benchmark WCED student against students in other countries (international benchmarking).**
- **Testing to be conducted in Afrikaans and English.**

# Study Limitations

- **Testing was conducted towards the second quarter of the year. Students at that time had not covered the amount of work for the whole year. Therefore we could not test content – but rather academic language proficiency at this level.**
- **Study had a limited focus on factors affecting learner performance.**
- **Unavailability of an international language instrument to benchmark WCED's Grade 8 students.**

# Language Assessment Considerations

- **Historically, the Grade 8 WCED student population has been linguistically and culturally diverse – consisting of majority students who had 3 of the 11 official languages (i.e. Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa) as their HL, and the minority HL speakers of languages such as Sesotho, Setswana and others.**
- **Of the 3 main languages (Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa) used in the province by most learners as HL, only two (English and Afrikaans) are used as languages of learning and teaching or LoLT in Grade 8.**

- **While students in the province who are Afrikaans or English HL speakers could learn either language as a subject and a LoLT at HL level, Africans students (especially isiXhosa-speaking students) could take either language at first additional language level as LoLT in addition to learning isiXhosa as a subject at HL level.**
- **During the two previous Grade 8 assessments conducted by a foreign assessment agency isiXhosa HL students were administered English HL designed tests. This is a mismatch the research team tried to avoid or correct.**

- **To ensure the validity of the assessment, it was crucial to accommodate as much as possible the linguistic diversity of the Grade 8 student population. These would enrich the study findings and avoid a wholesale generalisation of the findings.**
- **While accommodating linguistic diversity on the local front, the challenge to the study was also to incorporate a comparison of the performance of students in the province to their counterparts internationally (international benchmarking).**

# Language Instrument

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- **The instrument was aligned to the NCS with 4 of the 6 pencil-and-paper testing amenable Learning Outcomes assessed. The percentage item composition is given next to each LO:**
  - LO3: Reading and Viewing: 30%
  - LO4: Writing: 30 %
  - LO5: Thinking and Reasoning: 30%
  - LO6: Language Structure and Use: 10%
- **Accommodation strategies used in developing the language instrument:**
  - Translation
  - Versioning
  - Glossing

- **A unique version of the language instrument was used for each of the 3 language groups. Each version comprised a HL part and a LoLT part.**
  - Afrikaans HL and Afrikaans LoLT at HL level
  - English HL and English LoLT at HL level
  - isiXhosa HL and English LoLT at FAL level
- **The HL section of each of the 3 versions had two common constructed-response items (two extended pieces of writing).**
- **Assessment items in the instrument were mainly of selected-response and constructed-response types.**

# Home Language (HL) Part

Afrikaans HL	English HL	Xhosa HL	Learning Outcomes	Percentage of Test
Reading Extract: Literature comprehension questions including language structure	Reading Extract: Literature comprehension questions including language structure	Reading Extract: Literature comprehension questions including language structure	LOs 3, 5 & 6	25%
Creative Writing Exercise	Creative Writing Exercise	Creative Writing Exercise	LOs 4 & 6	25%

# Language of Learning & Teaching (LoLT) Part

<b>Afrikaans LoLT</b>	<b>English LoLT</b>	<b>Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Percentage of Test</b>
Reading & viewing texts from other areas of the curriculum; interpretative Questions – thinking and reasoning	Reading & viewing texts from other areas of the curriculum; interpretative Questions – thinking and reasoning	LOs 3 & 5	35%
Writing tasks	Writing tasks	LOs 4, 5 & 6	15%

# Test Preparation & Administration

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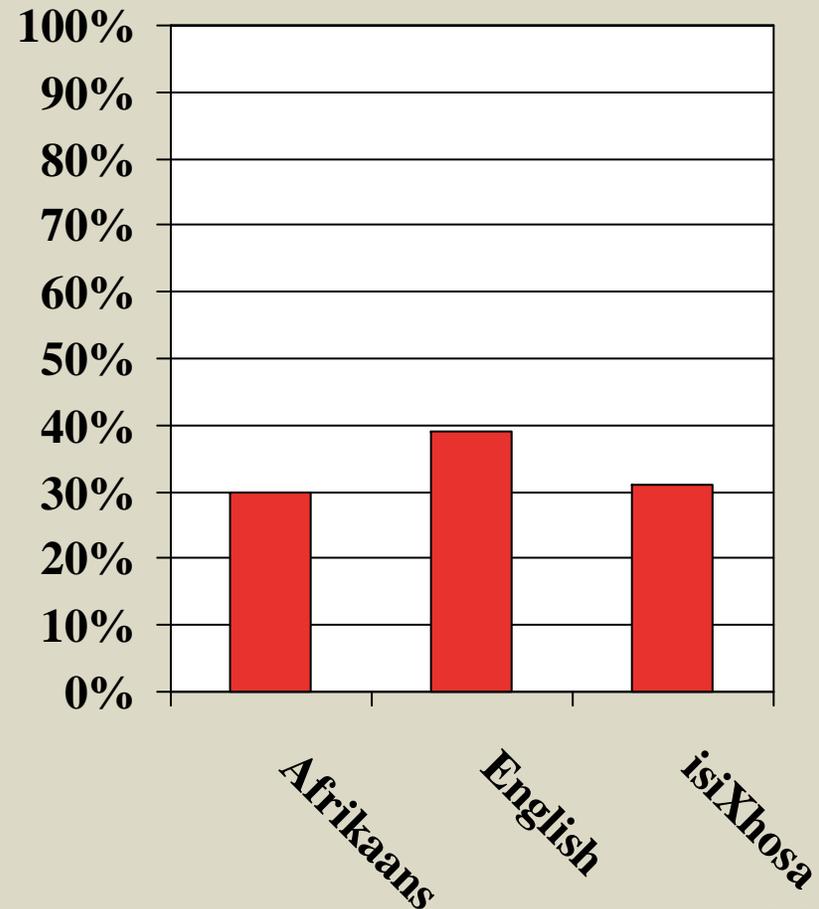
- **Language instrument development, field-testing, completion of final instruments and their handover to WCED by 01 April 2010.**
- **The application of the final instrument was undertaken during June 2006 by teachers using an easy-to-follow administration manual.**
- **In July 2006 completed test booklets were sent to the HSRC for data capturing, data cleaning and analysis and for writing of various reports the client requested.**

# Study Findings

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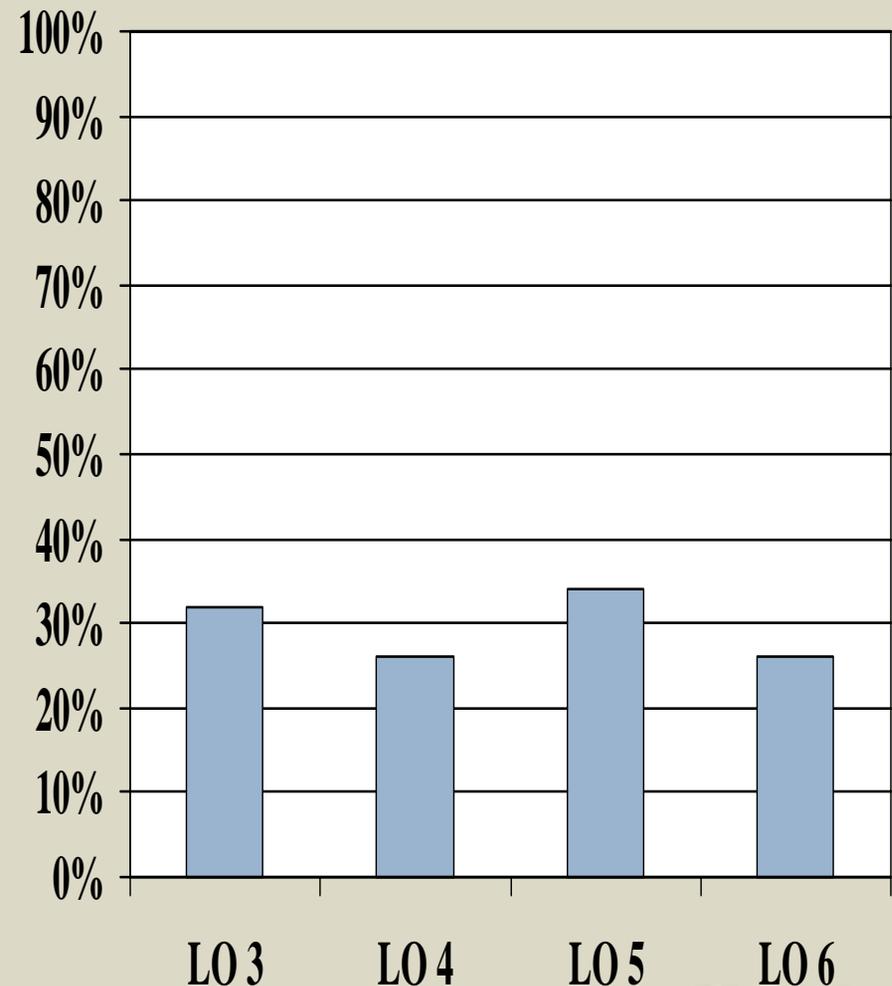
# Overall Language Performance

- The overall learner performance on the three versions of the language instrument was below 50%.
- Learners who took the English HL version of the test attained a higher percentage score overall compared to their Afrikaans and isiXhosa counterparts.



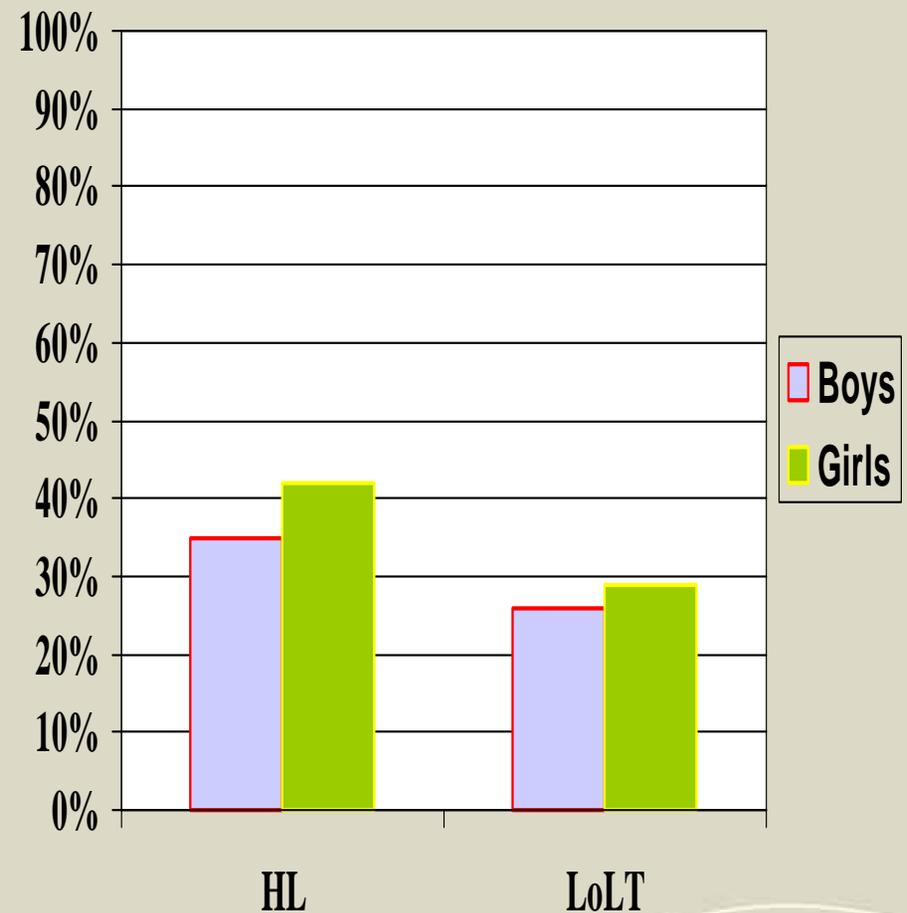
# Overall Performance by Learning Outcome

- The overall students performance across the three languages is very low (<50%) for all 4 LOs assessed.
- Learners found LO3 and LO5 tasks easier to handle than those of LOs 4 and 6. They found writing tasks and knowledge of syntax (grammatical structures) difficult.



# Performance by Gender

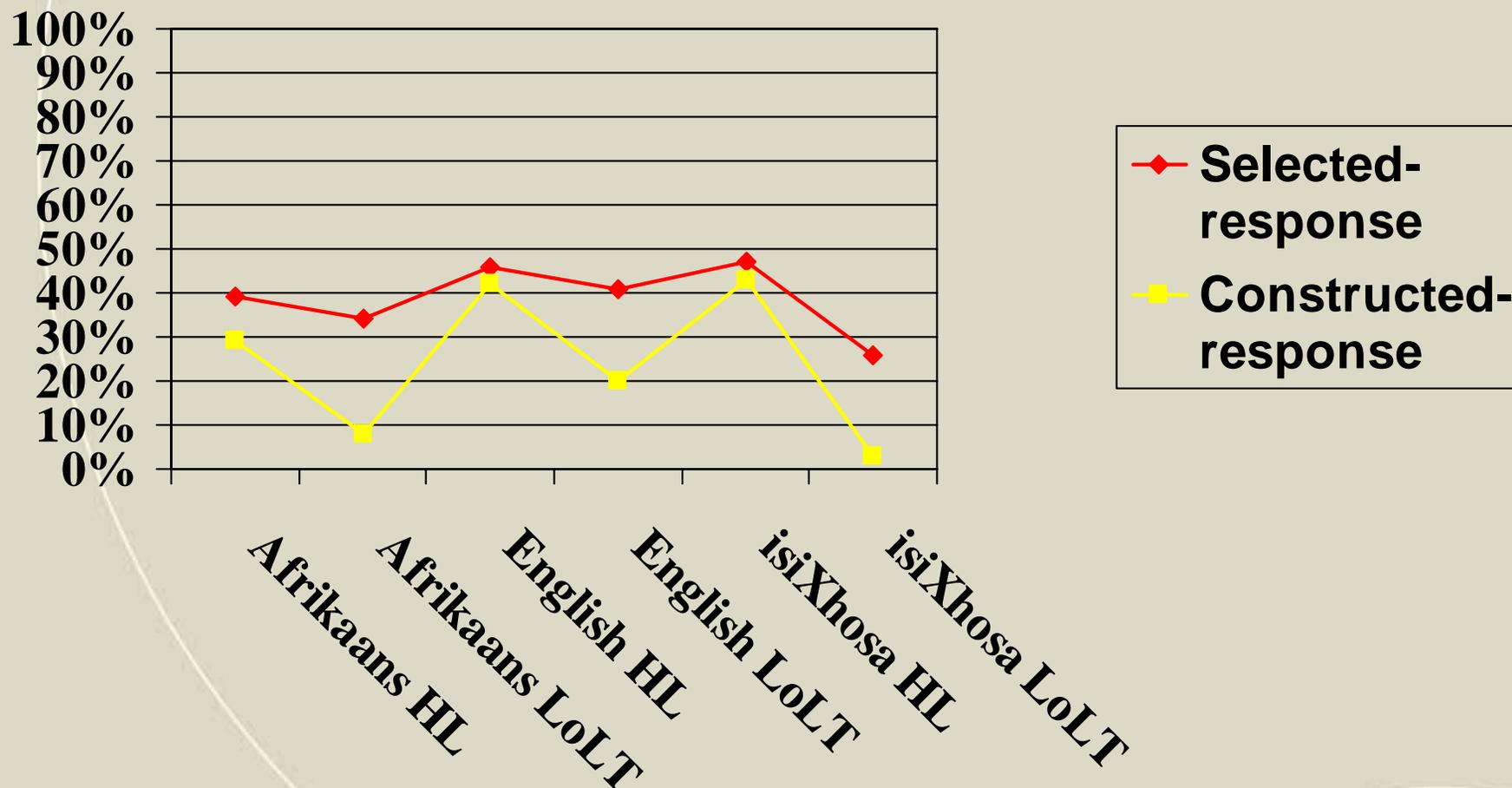
- **Girls outperformed boys on both the HL and LoLT parts of the language assessment overall.**



# Performance by Item Type

- **Students consistently performed better across the various versions of the instrument and the HL and LoLT sections, when answering selected-response (SR) questions compared to answering constructed-response (CR) items.**
- **They found it easier to recall, recognise and select knowledge aspects from options provided within items, than to produce extended and meaningful responses where they had to implement their understanding of the work.**
- **The larger SR-CR gap for LoLT than HL could imply that students found it easier to handle linguistic structures and to apply their language skills in their HL materials whereas they found the application and use of language across the curriculum to be more challenging.**

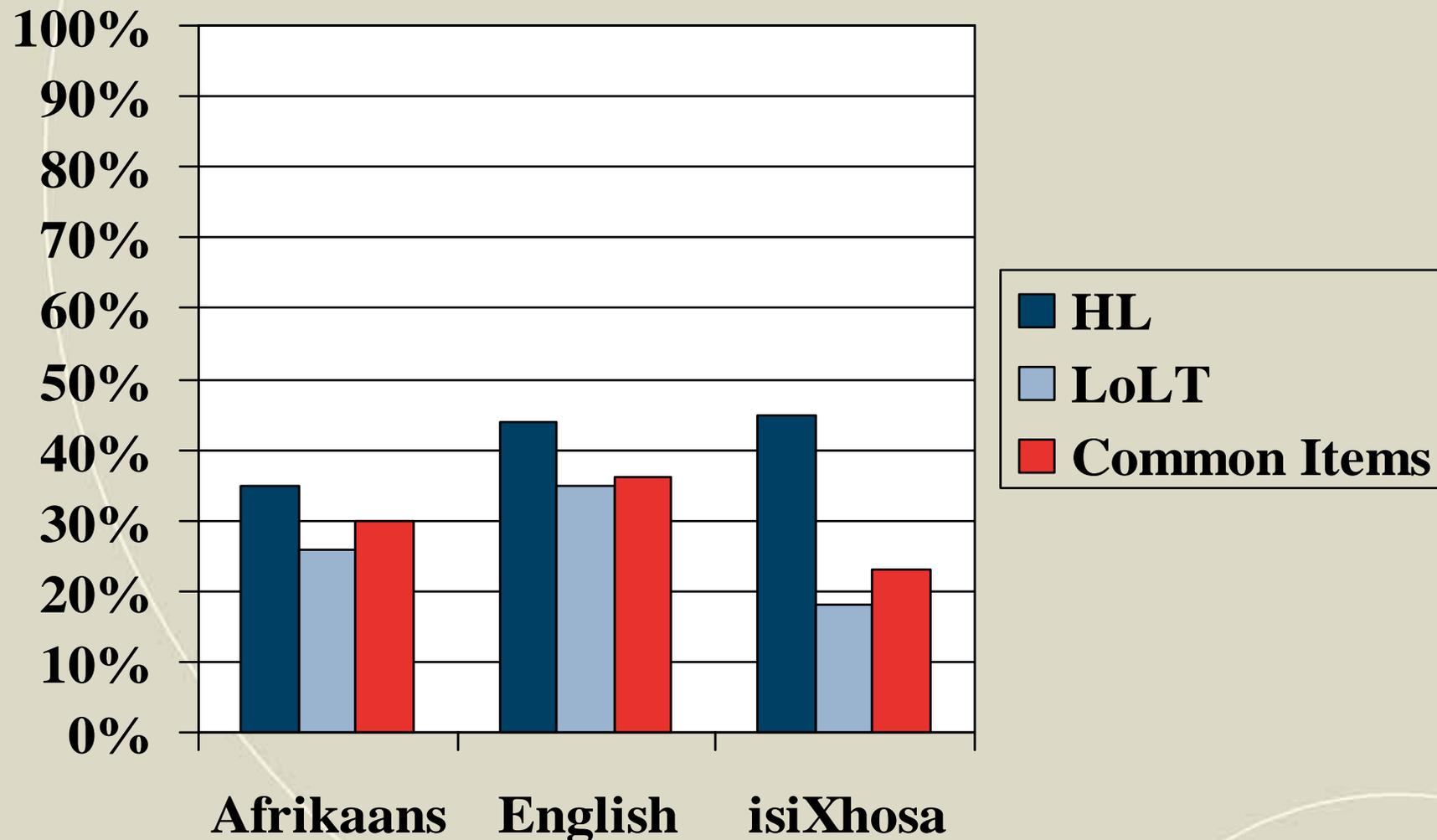
# Performance by Item Type



# Performance by HL, LoLT & Common Items

- In the HL section of the instrument, which was largely based on a literacy extract taken from the reading lists of each HL group, isiXhosa-speaking students achieved higher scores than both their Afrikaans- and English-speaking counterparts.
- For both the LoLT and common items components of the instrument, English-speaking students outperformed both the Afrikaans and isiXhosa students.
- The poor performance of isiXhosa learners on the LoLT section is not surprising since these students were writing this part of the instrument in their first additional language, rather than the HL as was the case with the Afrikaans- and English-speaking students.

# Performance by HL, LoLT & Common Items



# Lessons for the Future

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**Large-scale assessments (at both provincial and national levels) can be conducted within a multilingual schooling environment to accommodate for the linguistic diversity that exists in the student population. Evidence from the WCED Grade 8 assessment demonstrated the following:**

- It is possible within a large-scale assessment regime at the Senior Phase and beyond to incorporate learners from diverse language backgrounds catered for by the education system.
- This would avoid the current narrow focus of large-scale assessments being dictated to by policy-makers' linking of certain (selected) school subjects (e.g. English) to economic prosperity thereby relegating African languages to narrow foci such maintenance of culture and the interpersonal communication functions.

- South Africa has the potential to lead the international community in the development of diversity-sensitive assessments.
- The twin principles of educational equity and construct validity in assessment within a diverse society require comprehensive inclusion of different language versions of assessment instruments.
- There is no doubt that students who are speakers of African languages are at a disadvantage where they are assessed in a second language (first additional language, English) compared with students who have Afrikaans or English as HL.

- A multilingual system-wide assessment has the advantage of providing differentiated and enriched data on students' learning of their HL and their knowledge and skills in using language to learn. This may enhance the process for intervening meaningfully in linguistically diverse learning settings. To this effect, the research team managed to provide some diagnostic and nuanced information to learners, teachers, parents, schools, districts and the province. Such information could be utilised for intervention purposes by these stakeholders.

# Thank You

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# Contact Details:

**Matthews Matome Makgamatha**

**Research Programme: Education and Skills Development (ESD)**

**Human Sciences Research Council**

**Private Bag X41**

**Pretoria**

**0001**

**South Africa**

**Tel: +27 +12 302 2320**

**Fax: +27 +12 324 2183**

**Mobile: 082 673 9603**

**E-mail: [mmmakgamatha@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:mmmakgamatha@hsrc.ac.za)**

**<http://www.hsrc.ac.za>**