
Executive summary

The status of the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in South African Public Schools: a quantitative review, 2010

Date of completion: 2010

1 Key words

Language of learning and teaching (LoLT); Education policy; School Governing Body; Single Medium; Parallel Medium; Foundation Phase; Intermediate Phase.

2 Commissioned and supported by

The evaluation was commissioned internally by the Department of Basic Education.

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3 Conducted by

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4 Background to evaluation

Learning in one's own language holds various advantages for the learner, including increased access, improved learning outcomes, reduced chances of repetition and drop-out rates, and socio-cultural benefits. The language policy for schools is guided by principles derived from the Constitution and the SA Schools Act (SASA), whereby the 11 official languages are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu, and the need has been recognised to "elevate the status and advance the use of indigenous languages" as a form of redress. The implementation of this policy in schools is fettered by the state's ability to provide the requisite resources.

The SASA prescribes that school governing bodies (SGBs) may determine the language policy of a school, albeit subject to the Constitution, SASA and any applicable provincial law. Thus, the underlying principle of the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) is to maintain the use of home language as the LOLT, especially in the early years of learning. Where no school in a school district offers the desired language as a medium of learning and teaching, the learner may request the provincial education department (PED) to make provision for instruction in his/her chosen language. It is reasonably practical to provide education in a particular LOLT if at least 40 learners in Grades 1 to 6 or 35 learners in Grades 7 to 12 request it in a particular school.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) stipulates that all learners should study their home language and at least one additional language as language subjects from Grade 1; and that all learners should have studied an African language for a minimum of three years by the end of the General Education and Training band. A significant number of cases in respect of language policy in schools have been brought before the courts. *NR Nkosi vs. Durban High School Governing Body* entailed a claim by a parent that her son (and other learners whose home language was isiZulu) was discriminated against by being taught in isiZulu as a third additional language, as opposed to isiZulu being taught at a higher level. The court found that offering Afrikaans as a subject at a higher level as compared to isiZulu, constituted unfair discrimination (on the part of the school) against all learners in those grades whose home language was isiZulu. The Court did not order the school what to do, but expressed the need for serious state commitment to provide the capacity to enable every public school in KwaZulu-Natal to be in the position to provide isiZulu at LLC 1 level.

Hoërskool Ermelo vs. the Head of the Mpumalanga Department of Education entailed an instruction by the Head of Department (HoD) to the Principal of an Afrikaans medium school only, to admit 113 learners who could not be accommodated elsewhere [to be taught in English] in 2007, which was contrary to the language policy of the school. The HoD withdrew the SGB's function of determining the language policy of the school and changed the school from an Afrikaans medium school to a parallel medium school. The court decision set aside the HoD's decision and the HoD appealed to the Constitutional Court, stating that the school was the only high school not filled to capacity.

The Constitutional Court found that a HoD may, on reasonable grounds, withdraw a school's language policy. The judge stated that the power to determine a school's language policy was vested in the SGB but that this did not mean that the function to decide on a language of instruction in a public school is absolute, or that it was the exclusive preserve of the SGB. These judgements confirmed the importance of ensuring that learners be given the choice of their home language as the LoLT or as an additional language. In recognising the right of a learner to receive education in an official language or in a language of one's choice, the state is duty-bound to ensure effective access to the right to be taught in that language.

5 Overall purpose of the evaluation

The purpose was to provide a trend analysis of language data for the period 1997/98 to 2007 in order to determine patterns and shifts in the status of the language in schools over time, and to provide a useful basis for assessing the effectiveness of policy implementation.

6 Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation included data from the more than 25000 public schools in South Africa for the period 1997/98 to 2007.

7 Evaluation questions

The question was to extract the numbers of learners of each home language in each Grade and to determine the numbers of these registered for each LoLT.

8 Evaluation methodology

8.1 Type of evaluation

The evaluation comprised a detailed analysis of data collected over a ten-year period to determine trends in the LoLT being used in public schools across SA.

8.2 Methodology

The methodology utilised comprised a review of the literature; a descriptive policy analysis; a summarisation of court records; and a detailed a descriptive analysis of quantitative data obtained from the Department's Annual School Survey.

8.3 Data collection

Data were available in the records of the Department of Basic Education, having been collected from each public school in the Annual School Survey at the beginning of March each year.

9 Findings

The findings of the evaluation were identified as follows:

Language usage in schools

The largest proportions of learners in the school system used isiZulu (25%), isiXhosa (20%), Sepedi (11%) or Afrikaans (10%) as their home language. The pattern was similar across all Grades, with the exception of isiXhosa, for which there was a significantly lower proportion of isiXhosa learners in Grade 12 in comparison with those in Grade 1. In reality teaching and learning does not really take place in a single language. Anecdotal evidence points to instances where teaching and learning take place in one language, while assessment takes place in another. Alternatively, teaching and learning could take place in two languages in the same class via dual medium instruction. The majority of learners in the school system (65%) in 2007 learnt via the medium of English. The next most common languages of learning were Afrikaans (12%), isiZulu (7%) and isiXhosa (6%). However, in the Foundation Phase Grades, the proportions were significantly different. Between 1998 and 2007, the proportion of Grade 1 learners with English as LoLT declined gradually from 32% to 22%. This occurred simultaneous with an increase in the proportions with isiZulu at LoLT (from 17% to 23%), or Afrikaans (from 5% to 10%), or siSwati (0% to 2%). Those with isiXhosa as LoLT remained at the 17% level as did the other smaller LoLT proportions. In Grades 2 and 3, patterns were similar, except that the decline in proportions with English as LoLT was from higher bases, namely 35% to 24% (Grade 2) and 41% to 28% (Grade 3). Conversely, the proportions with isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi and Tshivenda as LoLT, increased over the period.

Home language usage

Central to the analysis of the data on the home language and LoLT of learners, is the degree to which learners, particularly those in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, are learning in their home languages. In 2007, 80% of Foundation Phase learners were learning in their home language, a substantial increase over the 55% in 1998. Nevertheless, almost 25% of African home language Foundation Phase learners' LoLT was not their home language in 2007. Almost 800000 Foundation

Phase learners were taught via the medium of English, while only 187 384 learners' home language was English, implying that more than 600000 Foundation Phase learners (20%) were learning via English rather than their home language in 2007. At a smaller scale, 9000 Foundation Phase learners were learning via the medium of Afrikaans, even though their home language was not Afrikaans.

There was a significantly lower correspondence between home language and LoLT in the Intermediate Phase, compared to the Foundation Phase. In 2007, only 27% of Intermediate Phase learners were learning in their home language, a moderate increase from 20% in 1998. An interesting pattern can be observed in the trend data for Afrikaans and English. More learners whose home language is *not* Afrikaans, are learning via the medium of Afrikaans, while fewer learners whose home language is *not* English are learning via the medium of English.

Additional Language Learning

Although the NCS calls upon schools to offer a language subject at the additional language level as from Grade 1, less than 5% of learners actually studied a language subject at the additional language level in the Foundation Phase. This means that schools did not really implement the curriculum policy of introducing a language subject at the additional language level in the Foundation Phase.

Impact of Home Language LoLT

A significant finding is that, in 2007, 80% of Foundation Phase learners were learning in their home language, an increase from 55% in 1998. This begs the question why there is not a corresponding improvement in learning, especially in Grade 3, given what is known about the relationship between learning in the home language and learning outcomes. The dominance of English as the LoLT in the school system is a reflection of a combination of factors, namely parental preference, tradition and capacity. English is usually favoured as a LoLT because it is associated with economic growth; it is a global language; it is useful for future studies; and it is a common language in the working environment.

LoLT categorisation

Overall, 5643 schools could be categorised as single medium schools in 2007. Most of these (4342) were English single medium, with 1174 being Afrikaans single medium and much smaller numbers of single medium schools using other languages. Parallel medium schools, that offer two or more mediums of instruction in different classes in the same grade for all grades in the school, numbered 12958 in 2007 (51% of schools in the country), an increase from 9436 in 1997. Most of these offer either English or Afrikaans, in combination with other languages, as their medium of instruction. By 2007, close to 17% of schools were English/isiXhosa parallel medium schools; while close to 14% were English/isiZulu parallel medium schools. About 9% of schools in the country were English/Afrikaans parallel medium schools. The balance (6532 schools) was neither single nor parallel medium, offering different LoLTs across their grades. For example, English/isiZulu in the Foundation Phase and then only English as the LoLT from Grade 4 onwards. These kinds of schools have been referred to by some as *transitional* schools.

Irrespective of grade, the majority of schools offer English, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Afrikaans as LoLTs. In 2007, 22978 schools offered English as the LoLT in a grade, 4908 schools offered isiXhosa, 4264 offered isiZulu and 3536 offered Afrikaans as a LoLT in a grade. Relatively smaller numbers of schools offered siSwati, isiNdebele, Tshivenda and Setswana as LoLTs, reflecting issues such as demographics, choice of school and the capacity of schools to offer African languages as LoLTs.

10 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The report provides a quantitative overview of the status of language in schools, including changes in trends in language provisioning from 1997/8 to 2007. It is limited in scope, as it does not provide textured and nuanced insights into how language issues manifest themselves in schools. Nonetheless, it provides a useful framework to facilitate an understanding of the structural issues related to language in education.

There is an inconsistency between LiEP and the NCS with regard to the grade in which a language subject should be introduced at an additional language level. The home languages of the majority of learners in the country are isiZulu and isiXhosa respectively. Between 1998 and 2007, there was a significant increase to 80% of Foundation Phase learners who learned in their home language. Most learners do not learn in their home language from Grade 4 onwards, when English and Afrikaans are the dominant LoLTs.

The majority of learners do not study English or Afrikaans as a subject (at either home language or additional language level) in the Foundation Phase, even though they learn via the medium of English or Afrikaans from Grade 4 onwards. The number and percentage of African language single medium schools increased modestly over the past decade. Although the number of Afrikaans single medium schools declined over the past decade, there was a corresponding increase in the number of Afrikaans parallel medium schools over this period.

Recommendations

The report recommends that the LiEP and NCS should be streamlined to promote a common purpose and emphasis. It further suggests and that the policy on African languages should be stated with greater clarity. In the Foundation Phase, teaching and learning material should be made available in all languages. Teacher training and development programmes should include issues related to language.

11 Evidence of use

The DBE indicates that findings have been incorporated into the National Curriculum Statement. The use of African languages as LoLT is being promoted more effectively.

12 Note on quality of report

The report is of a high analytical quality and makes sound recommendations based on scientifically-generated data. The overall quality of this report has been rated a 3.96 out of 5 on the scale applied to assess the quality of government evaluations [EQAT]. The analysis reveals a shift towards more usage of African languages in the Foundation Phases, but still a large proportion of non-English home language learners are being taught in English without adequate preparation. There appears to be a conflict between the preferences of parents for an English-based education for their children, and the pedagogically appropriate method of home-language education for as long as possible.
