

A Comparison of Reading and Writing Proficiency in Home Language among Xitsonga Speaking Learners in South African Primary Township Schools

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ABSTRACT A primary challenge in the multicultural school is to meet the needs of learners from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Although English as language of teaching and learning (LoLT) has been the popular choice among parents and learners in most South African schools since 1994, proficiency in home language plays an important part in cognitive development and provides the common underlying proficiency for the successful acquisition of English among learners. Learners' academic achievement is closely linked to their proficiency in both their home language and the second language (L2). This article reports on an investigation of the Xitsonga reading performance and Xitsonga writing performance of Grade 7 learners in township schools who are using English as LoLT. A literature study investigated the role of home language in supporting second language acquisition as well as the relationship between reading and writing skills. An empirical inquiry compared the assessment of reading performance in Xitsonga and writing performance in Xitsonga of selected Grade 7 learners through standardised testing. Findings indicated that learners performed poorly in both reading and writing skills. This holds implications for home language teaching methods used in schools and learners attitudes towards learning in their L1.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a crucial means of gaining access to important knowledge and skills. It is the key to cognitive development and can promote or impede scholastic success (Ovando 1989:208). In South Africa, a complex, multilingual country, at least 24 languages and numerous dialects are spoken (Schuring 1993:88). Here, as in other multilingual societies, language diversity exerts a powerful influence on the content, instructional methods and outcomes of schooling. Moreover, because language in education policy has been linked to race in this country, it is a highly contentious issue. For this reason national reconstruction in the democratic South Africa, of necessity, includes changes in national language policy. The Constitution of South Africa (1996) grants equal status to *eleven* languages as official languages, including English. Although less than 10% of the population of South Africa are native English speakers, a clear preference for English as language of teaching learning (LoLT) has been evident in most South African schools since 1994 (Alexander 2005). Learners' meaningful participation in school learning activities is closely linked to their proficiency in the LoLT. Those who lack this proficiency usually achieve poorly (Pudermann 1997). Using Cummin's (2000)

model of bilingualism, South African learners may have fluency in basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), but they frequently lack the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) to achieve in different learning areas (Heugh 2000; Schlebusch 2002). In most South African schools a straight for English model is used after four years of schooling (Pretorius and Mampuru 2007:40). The implication of this approach is that learners are still acquiring English while simultaneously using English as LoLT in all learning areas. Moreover, the acquisition of English cannot be separated from the first language proficiency of learners who are speakers of an African Language.

Against this background, a study was undertaken to compare the home language (Xitsonga) reading performance and writing performance of Grade 7 learners who are native Xitsonga speakers at selected township schools, which use English as the LoLT from Grade 4 onwards. The study forms part of a series (Manyike and Lemmer 2008; Manyike and Lemmer 2009; Manyike and Lemmer 2010; Manyike 2010) which examines aspects of L1 and L2 development among Xitsonga speakers. This aim was addressed by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation using a standardised language performance test.

The Relationship of First and Second Language Acquisition

The proposal that children's L2 competence is partly built on the level of competence achieved in their L1 led Cummins to develop the Interdependence theory (1989: 73). According to the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins 1992), language skills learned in the primary language can be transferred to the second language. It has been posited that the particular kind of skills that are transferred are:

- metalinguistic knowledge about how a language works
- the organisation and sequencing of discourse similarities
- the story grammar of narrative
- the relationship of morpho-syntactic systems
- the process of preliteracy including the knowledge that books are to be read, handled in a certain way and that books may contain different genres of discourse (Macdonald 1993).

The interdependence hypothesis suggests that the more developed the primary language, preferably supported by mother tongue literacy, the more readily will competence in the second language be developed. Cummins (1992) suggests that individuals possess what has been called a common underlying proficiency of knowledge and concepts that develops as they learn and formulate ideas about the world. Once gained this knowledge can be drawn on through any language a person knows or learns. For example, the brain does not store what is learned in each language in different compartments nor does information learned in one language have to be relearned in another in order to be useful. For example, once a child has learned the concepts of different colours, they do not have to relearn how to distinguish one colour from another in another language. They will, of course, need help in learning new labels for the different colours and have to practise in incorporating this new vocabulary into their second language repertoire. Similarly a child learning to read in a second language would not have to relearn the full range of skills presupposed in initial literacy acquisition and the second process is expected to be relatively more economical (Macdonald 1993). This idea of a common underlying proficiency helps to explain why

learners with previous education in their own country often do better academically than students who have been in English speaking schools longer, but never received any schooling in their native language. Children who have instruction from the beginning in a language they can understand are able to develop concepts and learn to read and write and calculate. When they enter an English medium school, they are then able to transfer those abilities to the new situation. Second language learners with no schooling in the first language may have difficulty with English instruction as they have missed out on important background knowledge which the other group has received.

Furthermore, children who do not have a developed proficiency in first language and whose first language maintenance is not supported tend to lose proficiency in the former as they acquire a second language. Moreover their culture may be undermined. This is known as subtractive bilingualism. Conversely, children who are fluent in the first language and whose first language is respected and its maintenance supported acquire a second language while retaining home language and culture. This is known as additive bilingualism (Baker 1996). Certainly the aim of multicultural schools should be to provide language minority children with an additive model of education. The disadvantages of subtractive language programmes have been extensively documented (Macdonald 1993; Baker 1996). As Heugh (1995) points out plunging children into English immersion programmes where first language is neither recognised or used and expecting children to become competent users of English (as medium of instruction/learning) in three to four years is unrealistic and irresponsible.

METHOD

In the light of the theoretical framework discussed, an empirical investigation focused on a comparative assessment of Grade 7 Xitsonga-speaking learners' Xitsonga reading performance and their Xitsonga writing performance in three selected primary schools in Metropolitan area in South Africa.

The Sample

The sample comprised 153 Grade 7 Xitsonga speaking learners from three primary schools

Table 1: Component: Reading comprehension

<i>Skill being tested</i>	<i>Number of items tested</i>	<i>Question numbers</i>
Recognising denotative meaning of words	1	26
Understanding details of content	9	1; 3; 4; 5; 6; 8; 10; 15; 31
Making general inferences based on the given text	5	2; 7; 9; 11; 21; 22
Making inferences related to the writer's intention	1	17
Making inferences related to the main idea	2	12; 14
Selecting precise words to describe something in context	3	27; 28; 29

Source: Chamberlain and Reinecke 1992: 17

situated in two townships in the Tshwane metropolitan area in South Africa. Two classes of Grade 7 learners were tested in School 1 and one Grade 7 class in each of the other two schools (that is, School 2 and 3) respectively. The schools were chosen on the basis of the LOLT used in the first three years of schooling. Xitsonga is the LOLT from Grade R to Grade 3; thereafter learners switch to English, which is also offered as a subject. All participants were L1 Xitsonga speakers, although they may have also acquired language proficiency in other African languages within the township context. Thus, in Grade 7 learners are using English as LOLT and require English proficiency skills to cope with the curriculum. Learners in Grade 7 were chosen because the seventh year of schooling represents an important stage in the development of CALP (Cummins 2000). Five to seven years is generally considered necessary to develop CALP in L2 and by the time learners reach Grade 7, they should have had sufficient exposure to both the academic content of the curriculum and to English as LOLT. Grade 7 is also the final year of primary school before the learner progresses to secondary school where the demands and complexity of the curriculum increase, and there is greater use of de-contextualised forms of language and less opportunity to foster language learning. Therefore, the proficiency in LOLT acquired by Grade 7 is critical for further academic achievement in secondary school.

Data Gathering and Data Analysis

Data were gathered by means of two tests namely: the Reading Performance Test and the Writing Performance Test in English (Intermediate Level) as developed by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). For this inquiry the tests were translated into Xitsonga by a language expert. These are standardised tests

aimed at determining the testee's reading and writing performances in the Intermediate Phase. These tests are applicable to L1 and L2 speakers, although different norms apply to these groups. To write the Reading Performance Test a candidate is supplied with a test booklet, an answer sheet, a pencil and an eraser. The Reading Performance Test is made out of multiple choice questions and learners are expected to choose the correct answer. Whereas in the Writing Performance test, a candidate is supplied with a test booklet, a pen and blank folio paper for planning answers.

The Reading Performance Test has two components: comprehension and grammar. The contents and structure of the test are summarised in Tables 1 and 2

Table 2: Component: Grammar

<i>Skills being tested</i>	<i>Number of items</i>	<i>Question numbers</i>
Recognising correct idiomatic use	5	16; 18; 19; 20; 30
Selecting correct use of parts of speech	9	32- 40
Making inferences related to the atmosphere	1	13
Recognising expanded meaning of summarised text	2	23; 25
Selecting appropriate language for the situation	1	24

Source: Chamberlain and Reinecke 1992: 17

The Writing Performance Test (Roux 1997) requires four tasks: the written description of pictures; spelling; sentence completion; and a short structured essay. The contents and structure of the test are summarised in Tables 3 and 4.

The test manual does not give any indication of what is considered a pass mark as performance depends on the context in which the test is written. However, 40% (or a raw score of 20 out of a possible total of 50) is given as a guideline for the Writing Performance Test; for

Table 3: Component: Spelling and syntax

Skills tested	Number of items tested	Question numbers
Denotative meaning of words and spelling (picture)	12	1-4;7- 8; 11-16
Syntax	1	9

Source: Bernard and Reinecke 1992: 19

Table 4: Component: Sentence writing and creative writing

Skills tested	Number of items tested	Question numbers
Sentence writing	2	5; 6
Creative writing	2	10; 17

Source: Bernard and Reinecke 1992: 19

the Reading Performance (a raw score of 16 out of the possible score of 40) is given as a guideline. These guidelines were used in this inquiry.

The total number of participants who wrote each test differed slightly due to absenteeism on the day the respective test was taken. The tests were scored by the primary researcher and statistical procedures were used by an expert statistician to analyse the raw data.

RESULTS

The Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga

A total of 153 learners wrote the Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga. The results are presented according to the scores in the comprehension component (Q1-12, 14; 15; 17; 21; 22; 26-29; 31) and the grammar component (Q 13; 16; 18; 19; 20; 23-25; 32-40). The comprehension had a maximum possible score of 22 and the grammar had a maximum possible score of 18.

The histogram in Figure 1 gives the results of the comprehension component in Xitsonga.

Figure 1 shows that the possible scores ranged from zero to 22. Just over eighty-six per cent (86.29%) of the learners scored below the 40% pass mark (which is equivalent to 9 out of maximum possible score of 22) and 14% of the learners passed. Only six percent (5.87%) of the learners obtained 50%. The largest group of scores (that is, 72.55%) ranged between a score of 3 and 7; and 0.66% of the learners obtained a zero score, which indicates very poor perfor-

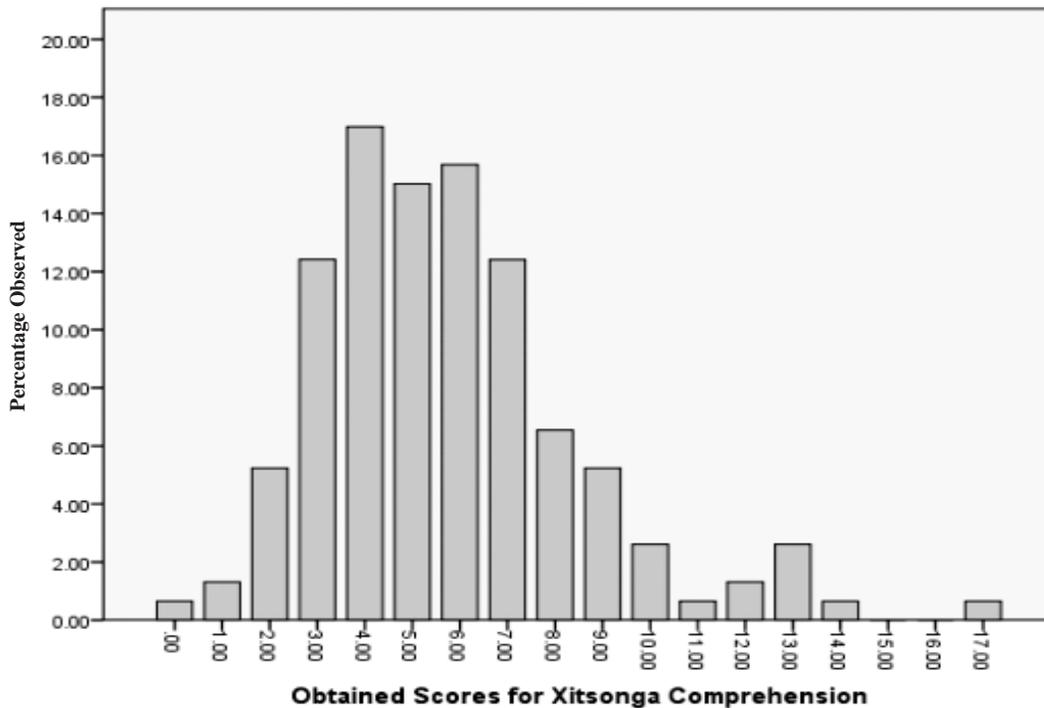


Fig. 1. Xitsonga comprehension

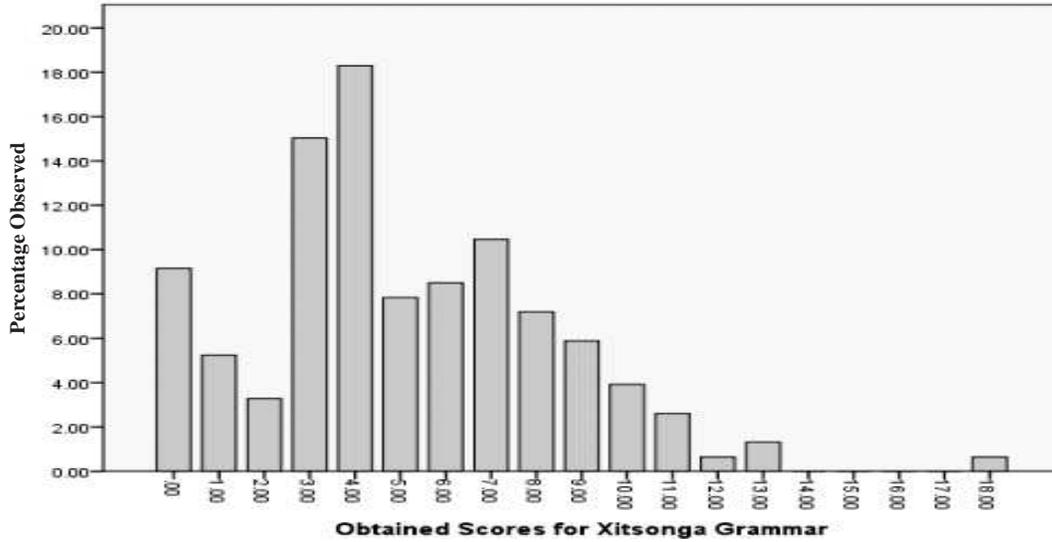


Fig. 2. Xitsonga grammar

mance. Overall, the mean score was 5.79, with a standard deviation of 2.75.

The histogram in Figure 2 gives the results of the grammar component in Xitsonga.

Figure 2 shows that the possible scores ranged from zero to 18. About sixty-eight percent (67.72 %) of the learners scored below the 40% pass mark (which is equivalent to 7 out of maximum possible score of 18), and 32% of the learners passed. Only about five percent (5.22 %) of the learners obtained a mark of at least

50%. However, 0.65% obtained a score of 100%. The largest group of the scores (that is, 33.33%) ranged from a score of 3 to 4; and 9.15% of learners obtained a zero score, which indicates very poor performance. Overall, the mean score was 5.14, with a standard deviation of 3.24.

The results of the two components: comprehension and grammar (Figs. 1 and 2) were combined to provide the overall results of the Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga as portrayed in Figure 3.

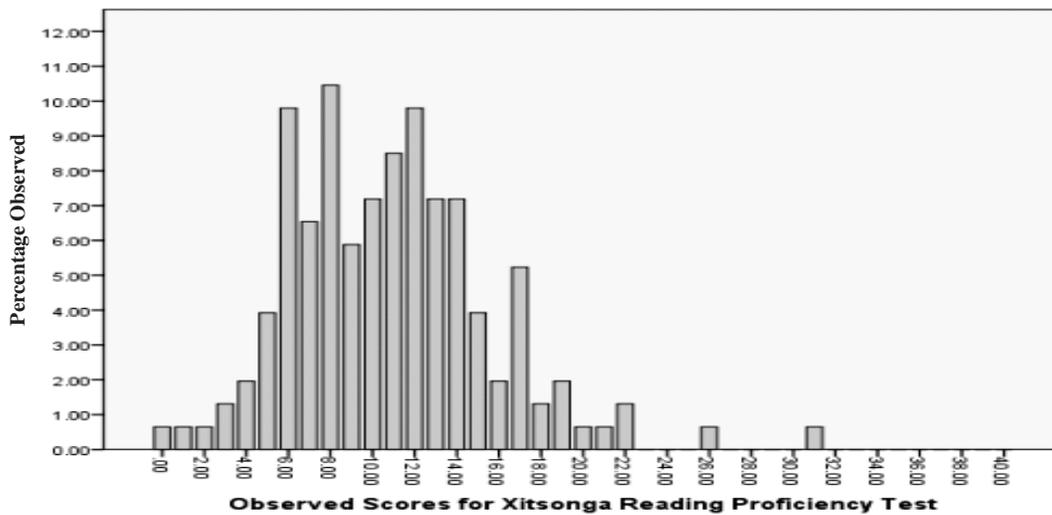


Fig. 3. Xitsonga reading performance

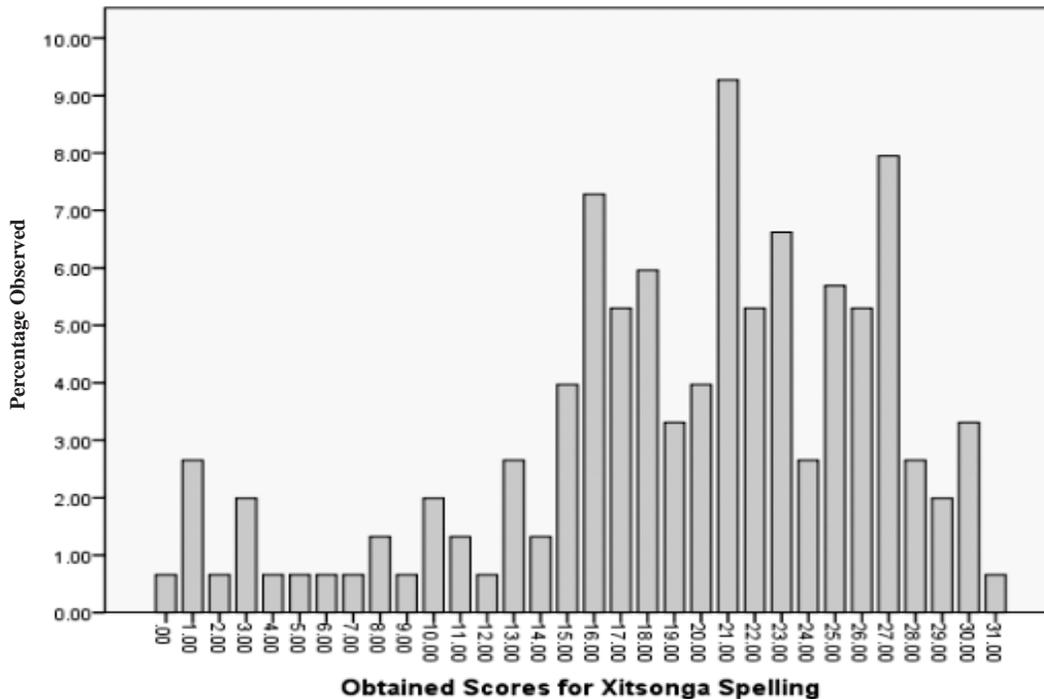


Fig. 4. Xitsonga spelling and syntax

The combined mean score for the Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga was 10.84 (standard deviation 4.78). The highest score obtained for the Reading Performance was 31; with 0.65% of the learners obtaining a zero. None of the learners obtained a score higher than 31. The overall learners' scores fell below the 50 percentile rank. The top 3.07% percent of the raw score were between 53 and 86 percentile rank (equivalent to a stanine of 5 to 7), which indicates average, high average and above average scores. The majority of the scores 40% ranged from 1 to 9 (equivalent to a stanine of 1 and 2 which indicates very poor to poor performance. The very poor stanine score of 0 was observed in 0.65% of the learners.

The Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga

A total of 151 learners (due to absenteeism on the test day) wrote the Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga. The results are presented according to the scores in spelling and syntax (Q1-4; 7-9; 11-16) and sentence writing and creative writing (Q5, 6, 10 and 17). The spelling and syntax had a maximum possible score of 37 and

the creative writing and sentences had a maximum possible score of 13. The histogram in Figure 3 gives the tabulated results of the spelling and syntax in Xitsonga.

Figure 4 shows that the scores were not evenly distributed through the zero to 37 possible raw score range. Altogether 52% of the scores were above the 50% mean average, with an even 6% of the raw scores being between 28 and 32 of the maximum possible score of 37. A proportion of the scores, 19%, were below the 25% mean average, with 0.7% obtaining a zero score.

The histogram in Figure 5 gives the results of sentence and creative writing in Xitsonga.

Figure 5 shows the scores were almost evenly distributed through the 0 to 13 possible raw score range. In total, 49% of the scores were above the 50% mean average, with an even 2% of the raw scores between 11 and 12 out of the maximum possible score of 13. Altogether 16% of the scores were below the 25% mean average, with 2.6% obtaining a zero

The results of the two components: spelling and syntax and sentence writing and creative writing (Figs. 4 and 5) were combined to give

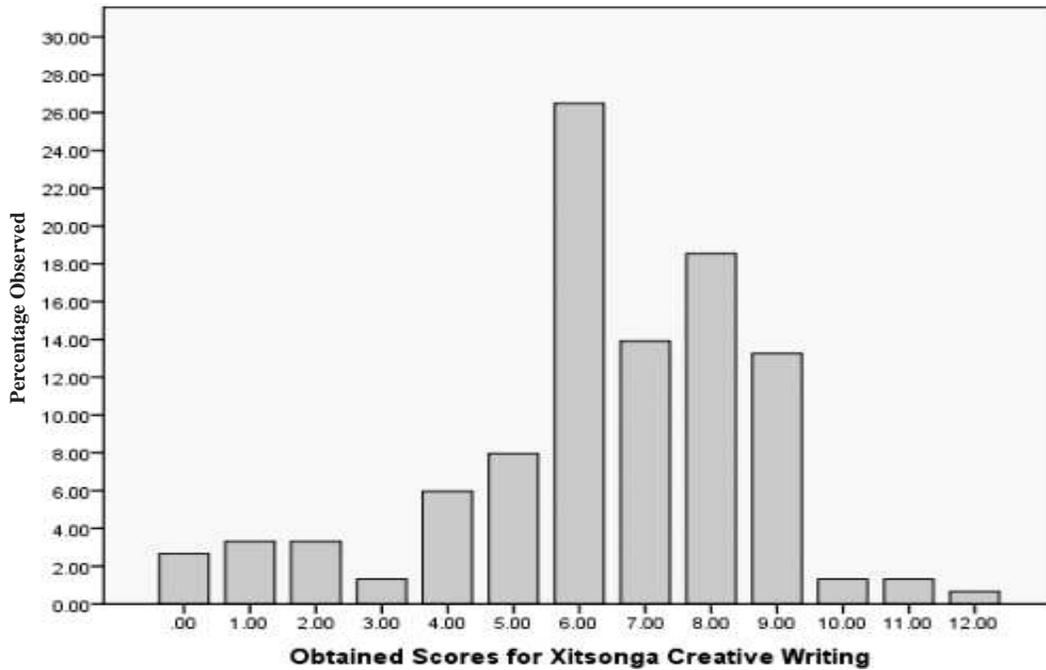


Fig. 5. Xitsonga sentence writing and creative writing

the overall results for the Xitsonga Writing Performance test as portrayed in Figure 6.

The combined mean score for the Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga (spelling and syn-

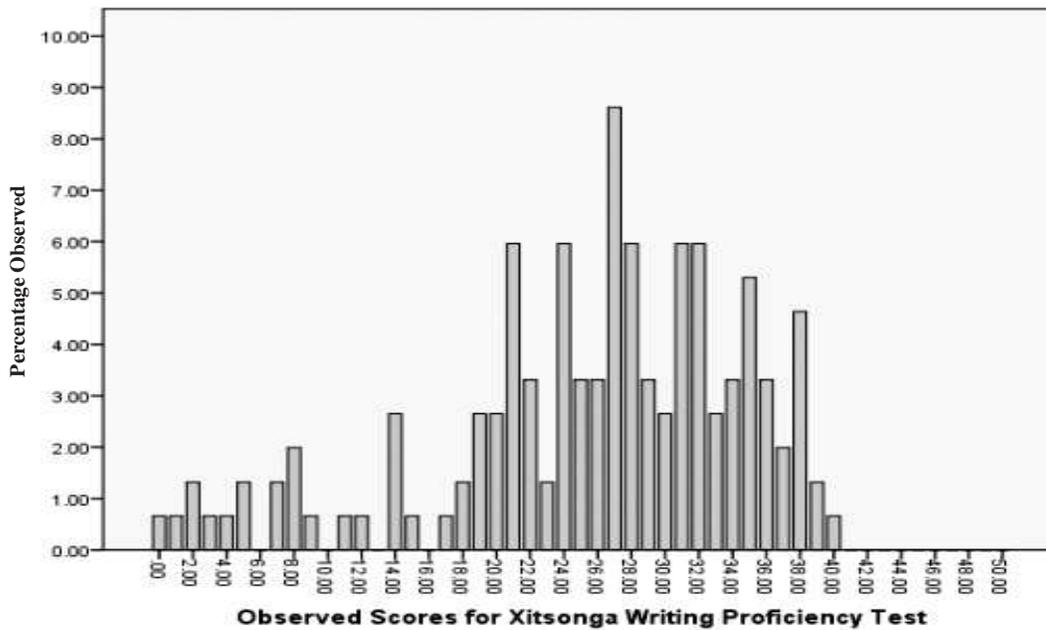


Fig. 6. Xitsonga writing performance

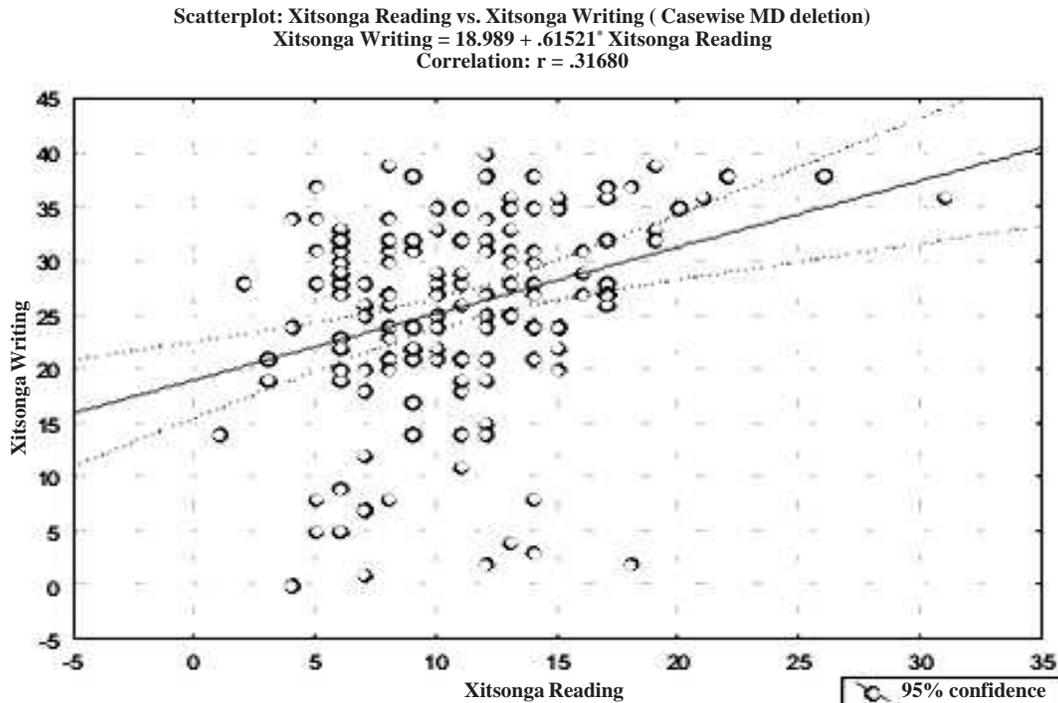


Fig. 7. A comparison of results of the Xitsonga reading and writing performance test results

tax and sentences writing and creative writing) was 25.71%. 34% of the learners failed to obtain more than the suggested sub-minimum (raw score 20) for the Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga. This means that only two thirds (66% of the learners were competent in writing skills in Xitsonga.

The scores for the learners' performance in the respective tests were also combined with a view to comparing the learners' overall performance in Xitsonga reading and writing. In other words, the scores obtained for spelling and syntax (Figs. 1 and 3) and for sentence and creative writing (Figs. 2 and 4) were combined for the respective tests. The histogram in Figure 7 gives the comparison of the combined results of the Reading and Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga

Figure 7 indicates that there is a weak positive relationship between Xitsonga writing and Xitsonga reading as evidenced by a correlation of 0.32. Thus, the coefficient of determination is 0.10. This means 10% of the variability in Xitsonga writing is being accounted for by Xitsonga reading. It means only 10% of Xitsonga writing is being attributed by Xitsonga writing.

The result shows that 90% of the Xitsonga reading skills are not being accounted for in the Xitsonga writing skills.

A regression line was fitted to the data and the minimum mark one can have in Xitsonga writing is 19 out of the possible maximum score of 50 regardless of knowledge of Xitsonga reading. It can also be noted that for each additional increase of 1 unit in Xitsonga reading, the Xitsonga writing score increase by 0.62.

DISCUSSION

The Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga and the Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga were assessed out of the possible maximum scores of 40 and 50 respectively. The discussion interrogates the results based on the four components of the respective tests: reading comprehension; and grammar (Tables 1 and 2); and spelling and syntax; and sentence writing and creative writing (Tables 3 and 4).

With regard to the Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga, learners performed very poorly in the component: reading comprehension. Learners obtained a mean of 5.79 (standard deviation

= 2.75) out of the possible maximum score of 22. This was less than 25% of the possible score, which is far below the normal mean score of 12. The results for the component: grammar shows a similar pattern to the reading comprehension results. Learners obtained a mean of 5.14 (standard deviation = 3.24) out of the possible maximum score of 18. The highest score obtained for grammar was 18 out of 18; with 5.56% of the learners obtaining a zero score.

With regard to the Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga, learners performed very poorly in the component: spelling and syntax. Learners obtained a mean of 32.8 (standard deviation = 7.59) out of the maximum possible score of 37. The highest score for spelling and syntax was 31 with 0.7 % of learners obtaining a zero. The results for the component: sentence writing and creative writing shows a similar pattern to the spelling and syntax results. Learners obtained a mean of 6.37 (standard deviation = 2.27) out of the maximum possible score of 13. The highest score for sentence writing and creative writing was 12, with 2.6% of learners obtaining a zero score.

There was no statistical difference between the Reading Performance Test in Xitsonga and the Writing Performance Test in Xitsonga. The results for both the Reading and the Writing Reading Performance Tests in Xitsonga are very low and indicate learners' poor ability to cope with reading and writing performance in Xitsonga as required by the demands of the LoLT in the junior primary phase.

CONCLUSION

The commencement of the senior primary phase marks a sudden and abrupt transition to English as the LoLT for the entire curriculum which concurrently broadens into content subjects, each with its own technical vocabulary, concepts and discourse. The foremost problem encountered is the disparity between learners' actual L2 proficiency and the proficiency required of them to master new academic content through medium of English. The Grade 7 L2 learners in this study may have acquired surface elements of language such as basic vocabulary, comprehension and grammar which allow them to express themselves in undemanding context-embedded situations. However, overall school performance requires learners to dem-

onstrate subject-specific technical vocabulary and reading and writing skills in all contexts for school success. In summary, the study indicates that the learners who participated appear at risk of becoming subtractive bilinguals who are not sufficiently proficient in reading and writing to benefit from the curriculum.

As mentioned earlier, the literature indicates a strong correlation between reading and writing abilities (that is, good readers tend to be good writers and vice versa). Common cognitive processes and text structural components underlying reading and writing abilities imply that development in one skill enhances capabilities in the other. However, this study did not demonstrate this relationship, possibly due to the nature of the reading performance test which relied on multiple choice. Nevertheless, it remains sound pedagogy for all teachers to teach adequate language skills across the curriculum. In many South African schools, teachers and learners often fail to recognise the importance of mother tongue education. Added to this are, among others, inadequate classroom resources, lack of school libraries and a print culture at home which exacerbate a situation in which L1 learners are not adequately prepared to comprehend a variety of texts and to model their own writing effectively on these texts. In summary, poor L1 reading and writing performance is strongly linked to poor L1 CALP development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, each teacher, both the language and the subject teacher, should assume the responsibility of teaching literacy skills as well as academic content in all learning areas. In this context literacy implies that a learner should be assisted in mastering technical vocabulary required for school subjects; various genres of writing required for school subjects; the language of the textbook; and comprehension and writing skills required during testing and examinations. It is recommended for teachers to use instructional techniques that allow learners to acquire the vocabulary and grammar in L1 which enable them to reach the threshold required for successful academic performance. Once learners reach the threshold level, they will be able to concentrate not only on the meaning and structure of the language but also on subject knowledge and its demands. Read-

ing comprehension can be improved through using learners' own texts and by encouraging narrow reading, that is, reading that is confined to a single topic or reading that is confined to one author. Furthermore, written texts carefully chosen to support the development of L2 proficiency provide a fruitful source of good language input which provide models for learners' own writing.

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