

## Challenges Faced by Students in Mother Tongue Administered Assessments in Higher Education

Nontokozi Mashiya

*School of Education Studies, Faculty of Education, Edgewood Campus,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, P/ Bag X 03, Ashwood 3605, South Africa  
Telephone: +27 31 260 3670, Fax: +27 31 260 7003,  
E-mail: mashiya@ukzn.ac.za*

**KEYWORDS** Foundation Phase. Medium of Instruction. Pre-Service Teachers. Perceptions. Students' Performance

**ABSTRACT** Assessment is a central element in the overall quality of teaching and learning in all spheres of education and higher education is no exception. It determines whether or not the outcomes set for a particular module are achieved. Therefore, the accessibility and inclusivity of assessment to enable all students to fully demonstrate the quality of their learning is important. This paper focuses on assessments administered in mother tongue – isiZulu in one South African university. This follows the initiative of teaching in a medium of instruction of an African language as the constitution of South Africa encourages the promotion of these languages. A Foundation Phase programme within the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) qualification is delivered in a dual medium of instruction of English and isiZulu. IsiZulu speaking students were taught and assessed in isiZulu and some materials given to them were written in both languages. It was therefore vital to investigate the feelings and the challenges of these students as they were lacking in isiZulu since they received their basic education in English medium schools and hence could only converse in isiZulu. Challenges encountered by these students during the assessment period and the impact it had on their performance were investigated. The study is qualitative in nature and is located within the interpretive paradigm. Using purposive sampling, two of these students who were in isiZulu class were identified. Data was generated through interviews, observations during class presentations and an analysis of students' work. Data revealed complex feelings such as uncertainty, anxiety and frustration that students encountered during assessments. It further shows that students battled to understand instructions and could not spell words correctly when expressing their views in a test and examination. The paper argues that those involved in the modules offered in mother tongue should give students instructions that are written in mother tongue as well as in English to enhance their understanding.

### INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue teaching in South Africa has been necessitated by the democratic dispensation. The constitution of the country emphasizes the recognition of African languages. At all levels of education (school and higher education levels) policies on languages of learning and teaching (LoLT) were revised. The Department of Basic Education revised the language policy as a result the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997 was passed. This policy stipulates the application of additive bilingualism approaches when teaching foundation phase learners (Department of Education 1997). The Higher Education Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education (LPSAHE) on the other side, emphasized the need to transform and promote the use of African languages in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) (Council on Higher Education 2001). This call resulted to some HEI's reviewing their language policies. One South African HEI revised its language policy. This policy stipulates the use of isiZulu as one of the

LoLT. IsiZulu was chosen because it is the language that is widely spoken in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal where this university is located and the majority of students enrolled are isiZulu speaking. As the result, a Post Graduate Certificate in Education with specialization in foundation phase was developed. Three foundation phase specialization modules (Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills) were offered in a dual medium of instruction of English and isiZulu for the first time in 2008.

### Background to the Study

When entering the specialization, students' background of the language is not taken into account. As long as the students' home language is isiZulu, it is taken for granted that they know the language and hence can learn through it with ease.

Lectures in both languages take place concurrently and offered by two lecturers. Both groups are given English materials isiZulu materials are not available. To teach in isiZulu lectur-

ers develop transparencies and slides in isiZulu and that is the only material isiZulu group has. All the activities given to students are the same in both groups. Sometimes content differ slightly to suit the context of African learners. For example, examples that are used in the English class are not used in the isiZulu class.

Assessment was also administered in both languages. All assessment activities given to students are the same including time allocation is the same to both groups. In all three foundation phase specialization modules, students do projects, tests, written assignments, class presentations; school based teaching practice, formative and summative assessments and examination. Students get one examination paper written in two versions.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The interest of conducting the study on mother tongue administered assessments in higher education stems from three sources: researchers own interest, wider issues on mother tongue teaching and existing literature on mother tongue teaching in higher education.

Firstly, the researcher's main interest of writing the paper is to reflect and give voice to students who experienced this journey of learning in mother tongue in the institution of higher learning for the first time in history. This has been necessitated by the fact that mother tongue teaching is being piloted and the study of this nature has been deemed necessary to influence future decisions and the success of this initiative in this university.

Secondly, stakeholders in education (parents, teachers and students) worldwide, as studies below bear testimony, hold negative attitudes towards mother tongue teaching, be it a school or university level. With this sentiment as a working hypothesis, it became necessary to find out from students in an isiZulu class if they are happy about the way assessments are administered.

Lastly, since mother tongue teaching in higher education institutions in South Africa is a new initiative, there is a shortage of studies that have been published on this subject particularly on mother tongue administered assessment; therefore this study is groundbreaking in revealing the challenges students counter in performing assessment activities in mother tongue of isiZulu. This study will contribute meaningfully to the

existing body of knowledge on mother tongue teaching in higher education.

The aim of the Faculty of Education of this university is to produce teachers who are responsive to the needs of learners as well as teachers who are able to teach in mother tongue in the foundation phase. These teachers will therefore be in a better position to implement the LiEP of 1997. This would produce better results for the entire country which is in crisis since systemic evaluations conducted proved that South African children are not competent in terms of literacy. Therefore, well trained mother tongue teachers are believed to have an ability to uplift the standard and the status of literacy in South Africa.

### ***Studies on Mother Tongue Administered Assessments***

Scholars like Cummins (2000) advocate mother tongue instruction. This applies to learners at a foundation phase level of schooling and at tertiary level where teachers of young children are taught to teach in mother tongue. Cummins draws the distinction between additive bilingualism in which the first language continues to be developed and the first culture to be valued while the second language is added; and subtractive bilingualism in which the second language is added at the expense of the first language and culture, which diminish as a consequence. Cummins (1994) quotes research which suggests students working in an additive bilingual environment succeed to a greater extent than those whose first language and culture are devalued by their schools and by the wider society.

Although perceptions of people about mother tongue vary (Papatheodorou 2007) it has to be implemented for its cognitive benefits (Hays 2009). Researchers such as Alexander (2009), Hays (2009) and Dempster (2010) support the notion of mother tongue teaching and Dempster (2010) elaborates that the informal code-switching medium fails when assessment is conducted in English. She further states that children are not able to demonstrate their competence in the subjects because of their language disadvantage. Dempster (2010) asserts that at tertiary level students translate examination questions into their home language before attempting to answer them to English. This study stresses the importance of conducting assessments in mother tongue; the language learners know best (Alexander 2009).

It sometimes becomes a challenge to determine which language is better developed in order to decide the language of instruction for learners who come from bi- and multilingual family contexts as Tshepiso Matentjie an Educational Psychologist maintains (Matentjie undated). At a tertiary level students may come from the background where the First additional language is more used than mother tongue to an extent where the student builds confidence on the second acquired language. This language becomes an instrument of thought (Alexander 2009) and is the one which has cognitive benefits when studying through it. It becomes a challenge to judge this student by mother tongue when they have to be channeled to their specializations. One of the challenges of mother tongue teaching at all levels is that African languages are certainly regarded as functional only when used as media of communication at levels such as interpersonal conversation, narrative and cultural practices (Foley 2000) and they have not yet been developed to the point where they can be used as academic media of instruction.

Assessment is meant to evaluate or measure student's knowledge and performance (Stephens (2005), she further states that the purpose of assessment is to understand and affirm students knowledge and abilities and to inform teaching practice. Therefore, when one has to be assessed, it is of crucial importance that they understand the language through which assessment will be conducted. This will enable the assessed to display the knowledge they have about what is assessed. Students need to be taught to write and answer in mother tongue more especially those who are perceived as lacking in mother tongue as well as those who did not get an opportunity to learn in mother tongue in their schooling career. Coimbra (2002) stresses the need to consider the teaching learning of the mother tongue in writing, alerting us to the crucial notion that writing is not a natural ability that automatically accompanies maturation; it is a skill that is learnt overtime. Students have got to be exposed to this skill through teaching and assessing them in mother tongue to be able to transfer these skills to their practice in the classroom environment.

In the study conducted by Berge (2002) on mother tongue teachers' assessment of essays at the national exams in Norway candidates were given a possibility to choose between different tasks. A mother tongue only assessment has obvious limitations. This could be a good idea

since one study conducted on mother tongue in one South African university (Mashiya 2010) indicates that there are some parts which were difficult to tackle in mother tongue more especially a section on the theoretical underpinnings of the Life Skills module where the names of theories per se were difficult to translate and hence were treated in English as they were. Mother tongue then became the problem. In such instances students need to have the flexibility to decide which questions to tackle.

Language plays a major role during assessment because that is where students are expected to display their understanding of the content learnt, apply new skills and display creativity in their own way based on the learned piece of work. Some activities require them to display high order thinking skills. As mentioned above, according to Bloom's taxonomy '*higher-order thinking skills require application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It requires being able to order one's thinking, make inferences to understand the underlying meaning entailed in words, and being able to understand the humor and absurdity; make generalisations; give critiques and form counter-arguments as well as draw sound conclusions*' (Bloom 1956). Students who are not well grounded in the language may fail to display their knowledge hence their high order thinking skills are poorly developed if they have to express themselves in that language.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and, as the name suggests, is the basis for a child's ability to cope with the academic demands placed upon on the student in the various subjects (Cummins 2000). Cummins states that while many children develop native speaker fluency within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between 5-7 years for a child to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned. In the case of all languages, be it English or isiZulu, learners need to be immersed in the language which will later be used as the language of learning and teaching. Two students under study did not get total immersion in the language at a school environment.

### Principles Influencing the Study

The study is influenced by three principles: theory of symbolic interactionism, assessment as the concept and the Taxonomy of Benjamin Bloom. Firstly, symbolic interactionism accord-

ing to Blumer (1969) is based on the idea that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. Blumer's work is also influenced by the work of John Dewey who insisted that human beings are best understood in relation to their environment. The theory of symbolic interactionism consists of three core principles: meaning, language and thought which are important constituents of assessment. When one has to tackle an assessment activity one has to understand the question being posed through instructions, one understands if the language being used is known and an individual has to think of a possible solution to the problem (answer) through language. Language is the core of assessment hence one formulates meaning through it and provides the relevant answer through thinking. Therefore without this instrument which is a language, there would be no meaning to the given instructions and hence no thought around that given activity, therefore failure to give relevant response or answer to the given question would be impossible. Therefore, this theory has been deemed relevant to the study on students' experiences of mother tongue administered assessments.

### **Meaning**

Blumer (1962) states that meanings are arrived at through social interaction. These meanings do not remain unchanged. They are interpreted and reinterpreted. According to Blumer, humans act toward things according to the meanings they give to those things. Symbolic Interactionism holds the principal of meaning to be the central aspect of human behavior (Blumer 1962). People act upon the meaning assigned to things. People's meaning is really a social construction of what they see as real. Once something is seen as real, it has consequences.

### **Language**

Blumer (1969) defines language as the source of meaning. Language is a tool to give meaning in social interactions. Therefore meaning emerges from social interaction and the language used. People make meanings by talking to others. This gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. Humans identify meaning in speech acts with others.

### **Thought**

Blumer (1969) maintains that thought is ability, distinctly different from animals in that we have the ability to think about things rather than simply reacting instinctually. It is our thoughts that help us to interpret language meaning. Blumer defines thought as a mental conversation that requires different points of view. One's own thought process is used to develop their own interpretation of things they encounter in their environment. The meanings of the things we encounter, though formed by social interaction, are altered through our understandings and therefore an individual's interpretation of the meaning will guide and determine action.

The focus of this study is on the challenges students experience in attempting mother tongue administered assessments therefore the core of the study is on the language of learning and teaching. This means that students who are custodians of the new initiative of mother tongue teaching and the assessments imposed to them have subjective interpretations which are caused by the way they perceive them. Students construct meaning using their frame of reference and the context in which they found themselves in. In order to access these interpretations this theory was used to develop instruments that were used to generate data. This study supports the idea that a social interactionist sees meaning coming out from the interaction between people. Furthermore, in semi-structuring the interview schedules and the three core areas of the theory such as meaning, language and thought influenced the design of the interview schedule. This theory will help to reveal how students interact with instructions given in their assessment activities

Secondly, assessment as the concept refers to *'an ongoing process of establishing clear, measurable expected outcomes of students learning, ensuring that students have sufficient opportunity to achieve those outcomes, systematic gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches the expectations and finally using the resulting information to understand and improve student learning'* (Suskie 2004: 42). This theory provides concept provides the rationale for assessment and selection criteria of the assessment techniques. This term embraces both formative and summative forms of assessment where in the formative the assessor wishes to

identify gaps in student's knowledge whereas summative is judgmental and is used for progression. This concept was used to structure the instrument as the interviews covered both these forms of assessments.

Suskie (2004) maintains that good assessments give assessors useful information, and are fair to all students. Fairness in this particular study addresses the issue of language used to teach and eventually to assess students. This will be addressed in the form of reflection where students were asked to talk about their experiences and reflect on being assessed through isiZulu. Different kinds of assessment strategies are applied in the module to allow students demonstrate understanding application of knowledge, together with generic skills (Schwartz and Webb 2002). Schwartz and Webb further state that letting students write long essays as a way of assessment does not help student demonstrate knowledge that is why integrated kind of assessment are important. To mention but a few, good integrated assessments comprise of complex simulations, case studies, role play or multifaceted projects to assess a range of knowledge, skills and attitudes in addition to written assignments, tests and examinations. Therefore the study draws on this notion to investigate challenges students encounter in different kinds of assessment activities.

Thirdly, a well designed assessment is designed according to the taxonomy of Benjamin Bloom. Bloom (1956) identifies six levels of learning which in turn are used as the basis of assessment. Blooms Taxonomy of Learning has six steps of appropriation:

*Knowledge* – knowledge looks at among others, specifics of the content and terminology. As students are learning to teach in mother tongue, the specifics of the language and terminology play a major role during assessment. This first step of appropriation was used to investigate if students are able to correct terms and how they use them in context.

*Comprehension* – comprehension looks at translation and interpretation. When given activities such as assignments students are required to look for information from different sources. Information is in English. As mother tongue students they are required to translate information and comprehend it. The study will use this step of blooms taxonomy to investigate if students were able to read information from

different sources comprehend it and write this information in their mother tongue in a congruent way.

*Application* – intention of using this step was to investigate if students were able to apply knowledge gained from learning in mother tongue. This was assessed through presentations and during teaching practice where students display skills to apply new term learnt in mother tongue.

*Analysis* – Students were expected to display skills of identifying elements, relationships and of organizing principles. Students had to display skills of analyzing information from the sources and put it in their own words. In this stage they should display the skill of recognizing information that forms an element of what they are writing about, has a relationship to it and the skill of organizing this information into a solid essay.

*Synthesis* – According to Bloom (1956) this level has to do with • Production of a unique communication, production of a plan, or proposed set of operations and derivation of a set of abstract relations. Generally, synthesis has to do with putting things together. Students were required to develop projects. Maturity in terms of language had to be displayed where students had to label their posters in mother tongue. What students produced, the decency of the language used and spelling were some of the criteria for assessment.

*Evaluation* – This step focuses on judgment in terms of internal and external evidence. Students were given an opportunity to reflect after their own presentations, this is the internal judgment and after that, students were given feedback by the lecturer about their performance, this covers the judgment in terms of external evidence based on their performance.

### Statement of the Problem

A Foundation Phase programme within the Post graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is delivered in a dual medium of instruction English and isiZulu. IsiZulu speaking students were taught and assessed in isiZulu. It was therefore vital to investigate the feelings of students who were lacking in isiZulu as they were ex-model C students (students who studied in former white schools) who could only converse in mother tongue. Challenges encountered by these students during the assessment period and the im-

fact it had on their performance were investigated. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- ♦ How do students who do not have enough grounding in isiZulu experience mother tongue conducted assessments?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This paper is a qualitative case study of two PGCE students who received their basic education from the previously advantaged schools known as former white schools hence students are called ex-model C's. The study is located within an interpretive paradigm. Strauss and Corbin (1990), MacMillan and Schumacher (1993) regard qualitative research as any kind of research that produces findings that are delinked from statistical quantifications or other means of quantification. Qualitative approach was deemed relevant to the study since it gave detailed information on the challenges encountered by students who attended classes that they saw as not befitting of their standard. This method afforded the researcher an opportunity to obtain data that is rich and in-depth. In addition Cohen et al. (2004) assert that in qualitative research we find that questions are often broadly outlined with the purpose of letting the data generate questions and challenge the assumptions on which original ideas were built.

### Sampling Design

Participants were selected through a purposive sampling. During the introductory lectures student get the chance to introduce themselves and say where they come from since a PGCE qualification is done by people with degrees, others would have been employed for many years in other fields other than education. This brief introduction was done in order to find out if student have the background of teaching. During this session the researcher discovered that there are students who are ex-model C's (they went to former white schools during their schooling career). They were very fluent and had a good English accent compared to students who went to isiZulu medium schools. That triggered the researcher's interest and thus wanted to see how they are coping with isiZulu as they do not have

a firm background. They were therefore identified and monitored in class and at a later stage were told about the intentions of the study and were also asked to be participants. Students' informed consent was. They were informed that participation is voluntary. The names and identity of students are hidden in the study in compliance with ethical issues. The study was carried out at the end of the year (2010) shortly after the November examination.

### Instruments

Data was generated through three instruments. In-depth semi-structured interviews with two students who were the recipients of the isiZulu programme, observation during lectures, group and individual presentations and teaching practice, and lastly the analysis of their work in the form of assignments, projects tests and examination. Cannold (2001) argues that semi-structured interviews are "structured conversations". This type of interviewing allows for flexibility and it allowed me to probe for details on how students experienced the programme. Field and Thomas (2008) maintain that semi-structured interviews are valuable because they bring questions to the level of understanding of the participants. Questions were asked based on the four themes developed: (i) perceptions about mother tongue conducted assessments, (ii) formative assessment and (iii) summative assessments and (iv) performance. Under formative there are categories such as projects, classroom presentations, tests, assignments or essays whereas under summative focus is on examination and teaching practice. Observation is a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative enquiry (Marshall and Rossman 2006). It offers an investigator the opportunity to gather live data from naturally occurring social situations as Cohen et al. (2007) maintain.

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed through coding and four themes which were used to structure the interview schedule. The themes are: students' perceptions about mother tongue administered assessments, formative assessment (focusing on projects, assignments and classroom presentations), summative assessment (focusing on teaching practice and examination) and students' performance.

## FINDINGS

Findings are categorized into four themes perceptions about mother tongue conducted assessments, formative and summative assessments and performance. Under formative there are categories such as projects, classroom presentations, tests, assignments or essays whereas under summative focus is on examination and teaching practice.

### Students' Perceptions about Being Assessed in Mother Tongue

Given the background of student regarding their background one would anticipate that they disliked the initiative. But very much surprising, students perceive studying through isiZulu as a good undertaking stating that this will equip them with necessary skills to deal with isiZulu speaking children. One student said:

*'I'm happy I took Zulu and actually wrote something, even though all the time I was filled with anxiety and nervousness that someone will be reading my insufficient Zulu.'*

However there were some students who were skeptical because of the fear of the unknown

*'I thought I was torturing myself by taking isiZulu; I kept on thinking what I am trying to do, fail the year? It was not easy I must say but the fact that we talked a lot in class helped me a lot.'*

The pedagogy in which these modules were delivered to students was useful to the extent that although they were scared to learn through isiZulu but they found activities manageable as a result they perceived it as being helpful.

### Formative Assessments

These are a combination of assessments students did continuously throughout the year. Students displayed different feelings about these assessment activities.

### Projects

Assessment of creativity is assessed through developing resources to teach the three subjects in the Foundation Phase. Students were required to display this creativity by developing resources to teach in isiZulu class. They displayed the feeling that terminology hindered them from giving

the best as they had to mix languages and this resulted to them producing clumsy projects. Below is how students felt about developing projects in isiZulu:

*'What I found challenging was to find relevant terms for my resources. For example life Skills resources gave me problems because I did not know what to say carbohydrates, minerals, proteins and food pyramid are in isiZulu.'*

*'I found it hard to name a number freeze in isiZulu.'*

*'Space was very limited and isiZulu names are very long as a result my poster looks clumsy.'*

*'My posters have both languages where I did not know isiZulu term I wrote English.'*

Most of their responses show lack of terminology as the challenge they encounter in developing isiZulu resources. I noticed that work done by isiZulu students, was not as attractive as work done by English students in a way their posters were labeled. Their words were sort of sentences whereas English words were short and to the point.

### Classroom Presentations

Students were given tasks to present in class. Focus was on how well can students teach a Life Skills lesson to learners, however language as the instrument of communication happened to be the area of focus. Students are giving their reflections about this kind of assessment. This is how they responded:

*'Presentations are one of the activities I dreaded the most'*

*'I am not happy about the way I conducted my presentations, English was quite dominating as I do not know most terms.'*

Students displayed lack of confidence in their spoken isiZulu. Based on my observations where students were given activities to present on parental involvement in a life skills module, they had difficulty in using the isiZulu concept 'ukumbakanya' (which means involve). They used an English term instead. They also encountered difficulty a term 'izinjulwazi' (theories) stating that they are encountering this term for the first time. Students were learning isiZulu words in their presentations instead of displaying knowledge as the resulted they were corrected throughout their presentations.

### *Assignments and Tests*

Students had a challenge of getting information in English and then translate it into isiZulu. They encountered difficulty when they were to cite the author verbatim. They found translating this very taxing. One informant stated:

*'I dreaded writing the essays because I know I cannot write isiZulu. What I say out loud makes sense to me but writing it down is something else'*

*'The one thing that I feared the most was drafting assignments and writing tests'.*

*'I found translation of citations very difficult'*

My analysis of students work proved that students had difficulty in writing some words. Some words were wrongly spelt and wrongly used in some cases.

### *Summative Assessments*

Students regarded this assessment as a very torturing exercise. Students were assessed in the form of the examination. This also includes teaching practice supervision.

### *Examination*

Students displayed the feeling that writing examination in isiZulu was not an easy practice.

*'I do not think I even finished the exam, because I was battling'.*

*'Writing the exams was not bad but I battled with writing, the English version helped me a lot, to understand what was needed'.*

*'I was not sure of what I was doing because I ended up writing in both languages. There were paragraphs I wrote in isiZulu and in other paragraphs I was not confident to write in isiZulu, thinking that I might not express myself the way I would want'.*

*'Throughout these exams I have been so anxious and nervous, just by the thought of writing isiZulu'.*

*'Writing the examination in isiZulu was time consuming. You read English version to get an idea, you read isiZulu version and you write in isiZulu, sentences are long'.*

Varying ideas regarding examination were given. Time constraints, freedom to code-switch and choice of the language to be used when answering questions are some of the issues that emerged from the data.

### *Teaching Practice*

Students displayed dedication to teaching in mother tongue however my observation revealed that most of the problems students encountered during their teaching practice assessment were caused by learners themselves. Learners displayed lack of competence in mother tongue and that forced students to very much use English in their speech. This is what students are saying about their perceptions regarding their teaching practice:

*'During my teaching assessment teaching was not that bad because I knew from the back of mind that I will be teaching in isiZulu medium schools. For me this was the best opportunity to practice in isiZulu schools'.*

*'Learners were responding very well'.*

*'There are times where I had to use English when talking to children because I had no other alternative'.*

Overall students did well in their teaching practice despite the challenges they had to address, challenges posed by their lack of knowledge and learners lack of knowledge.

### *Students' Performance*

Performance is the crux of a teaching and learning situation. This shows if the outcomes are achieved. Students responded differently regarding their performance. This is what they said:

*'I know if I were to write in English my performance would have been much better than I did in isiZulu'.*

*'My performance was not affected by my writing in isiZulu, I believe I was able to express myself the way I would have in English'.*

Students' feelings about their performance varied. Some felt that writing in isiZulu affected their performance whereas others felt that it had no impact on what they were writing.

## **DISCUSSION**

Students with shallow background of isiZulu displayed different perceptions about the mother tongue teaching initiative. Some appreciate it despite the fact that there are challenges involved. Others see it as a better opportunity to practice using isiZulu, an opportunity they missed during their schooling career. They see it



as an initiative that with equip them with necessary skills to assess their learners in schools.

There are some instances where the notion of mother tongue works well and there are some where it becomes difficult to implement mother tongue. Findings indicated that student encounter some difficulty in maintaining mother tongue in their assessment activities. For example when students were asked to do projects by develop resources used to teach Life Skills, they had difficulty in writing some words in isiZulu. A food pyramid was written in isiZulu and different kinds of foods under it were labeled carbohydrates, proteins, minerals etc. this is caused by isiZulu underdeveloped conceptual framework. When developing Numeracy resources, students had a problem in writing charts on number freeze. The concept was problematic since there is no isiZulu equivalent that is known. These brought uncertainty as to what to write.

In the examination students failed to express themselves in proper isiZulu as a result there were paragraphs which were written in English in addition to code-switching that appeared every now and then in their writing. This finding supports Dempster (2010) who asserts that at tertiary level students translate examination questions into their home language before attempting to answer them to English. Students prefer oral activities to written ones. Therefore when mother tongue assessments are designed it is advisable to use a variety of activities where students are afforded a chance to use speaking and writing skills.

Students mentioned that the English version of questions help them to better understand what was required of them. This idea is supported by Alexander (2009) who asserts that the language becomes an instrument of thought. When setting examination papers examiners should consider that it is helpful to students to have both versions although they will be answering in isiZulu. Students should be given flexibility of writing in English where they feel they cannot express themselves. According to the findings students displayed different feelings about their performance. None of them failed however some felt that they would have done better if they were writing in the language they are confident with and some mentioned that writing examination in isiZulu made no difference in the way they performed because they were able to express themselves they way they would if they were writing in English.

The issue of time has always been the factor when writing in isiZulu under a restricted time. This is in line with the study by Mashiya (2010). During the teaching practicum students were happy to be taken to isiZulu medium schools and to be assessed teaching in isiZulu. Most of them stated that they will be teaching in isiZulu medium schools. However using straightforward isiZulu is not possible not to student teachers only but to all Foundation Phase teachers as this finding is in line with what Mashiya (2010) found. It is undisputable that African languages (isiZulu is no exception) have not yet been developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively and therefore function as fully fledged languages of learning and teaching as Foley (2007) states that they are as good as media of communication. Challenges faced by students in their assessment activities support this idea. Therefore this paper argues that there is a need to fast track the development of these languages as they are already in use as academic medium of instruction in higher education institutions.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, students are faced with challenges when they are to do their assessment activities in the language they are not well grounded in. Anxiety of writing examinations assignments and tests, where they have to show good writing skills was evident in their responses. This resulted to them having lack of confidence. Alongside this challenge was lack of relevant concepts, time constraints where they have to spend more time reading both versions. Writing in isiZulu is also a tiring activity since they found writing in isiZulu taking more time compared to the time spent by their counterparts who were writing in English. The issue of time should be taken into consideration so that isiZulu students are not disadvantaged during examination. Overall, administering examinations in mother tongue is perceived positively by students despite the challenges it has.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study recommends the following:
- ♦ Careful selection of students to go to mother tongue classes, students' background should also be taken into consideration

- ♦ Proper resources should be provided to assist students to better understand the assessment activities and to reduce stress during examination
- ♦ Time frames should be revised since it appears that isiZulu students finish writing later than those who are writing in English
- ♦ Double version of activities should be emphasized since students appreciate the opportunity of having the exam written in both languages
- ♦ Code switching should also be encouraged

### REFERENCES

- Alexander N 2009. Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Teaching. *A Paper Presented at the Colloquium on Mother Tongue Teaching in the Early Years*, held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on 22 May 2009.
- Berge K L 2002. Hidden norms in assessment of students' exam essay in Norwegian Upper Secondary Schools. *Written Communication*, 19(4): 458-492.
- Bloom B S (Ed.) 1956. *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives- Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain*. New York: Longman.
- Cannold D 2001. *Interviewing Adults*. In: G MacNaughton, S Rolfe, I Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.): *Doing Early Childhood Research: An Introductory Guide*. London: Sage Publishers.
- Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K 2004. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Coimbra N 2007. The Construction of Competence in Writing in the Mother Tongue: A Study in Initial Training. From <http://www.ucp.pt/site/resources/documents/FCH/Linguanet>.> (Retrieved on 29 April 2011).
- Cummins J 1984. *Bilingual Education and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy* San Diego: College Hill.
- Cummins J 2000. *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Department of Education 1997. *Language in Education Policy*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Department of Education 2007. *Higher Education Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Dempster E 2010. Talking Ourselves into a Language Corner. *Witness*, Durban. Tuesday, 26 January 2010.
- Foley A 2007. Mother Tongue Education in South Africa. Chapter in English and Multilingualism in South African Society. *Papers from the English National Language Body of PANSALB*, 2 February 2007.
- Hays J 2009. Steps forward and new challenges: Indigenous communities and mother tongue education in Southern Africa. *International Journal of Bilingual and Bilingualism*, 12(4): 401-413.
- MacMillan JH, Schumacher S 1993. *Research in Education a Conceptual Introduction*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers.
- Mashiya N 2010. Mother tongue teaching at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Opportunities and threats. *Alternation*, 17(1): 93-108.
- Marshall C, Rossman G B 2006. *Designing Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Matentjie M (Undated). Mother Tongue Instruction. From <http://www.hsf.org.za>> (Retrieved on 28 April 2011).
- Papatheodorou T 2009. Supporting the mother tongue: Pedagogical approaches. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 177(6): 751-765.
- Schwartz P, Webb G 2002. *Assessment: Case Studies, Experience and Practice from Higher Education*. UK: Kogan Page Limited.
- Stephens M 2005. *Activities to Measure Learning Outcomes in Developing Countries: Results of an Exploratory Survey*. USA: American Institute for Research.
- Strauss A, Corbin J 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park: CA: Sage Publishers.
- Suskie L 2004. *Assessing Student Learning*. USA: Anker Publishing Company.