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Informed by social justice? Fairness and inclusion in the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) English language test item development

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Background: Historically, there has been an unevenness in South African language teaching at schools and in teacher education at universities, exacerbated by a lack of agreed course standards and gaps in what is offered in language courses on teacher education across universities.

Objectives: This article argues that test design may contribute to greater equality – related to social justice – in education.

Method: This article reports on aspects of test design that ensure fairness and give it relevance and cultural responsivity: the diversity of item writers; the development of culturally sensitive, realistic items based on language teaching and learning scenarios; the inclusion of a scaffolded free writing experience and varied question levels.

Results: The authors describe how the test items bring notions of fairness to diversity of students and reflect the pedagogic realities of teaching English in a multilingual society.

Conclusion: We argue that testing of the English language and literacies in initial teacher education has a social justice imperative, and that testing of these skills is necessary to interrupt a trajectory of teachers with limited language and pedagogic knowledge and skills entering the teaching profession, typically going into schools where standards most need to be improved.

Contribution: The sociopolitical and intentional aspects of testing are an important value component linked to social justice. However, test item design notions of accuracy, fairness, validity, reliability and accessibility relate to internal validity within test design and have also been linked to social justice in testing, as much as they exist in types of test items and the overall test design. How these intentions and approaches might fulfil a social justice approach is the contribution of this article.

Keywords: uneven educational standards; English language teaching; social justice; cultural responsivity; fairness; South Africa; initial teacher education; testing.

Introduction

Testing in English language education courses at university level may not initially appear to be a social justice issue. Yet in South Africa, where approximately 8.7% of the population speaks English (Statistics South Africa 2025) as a home language, nearly all learn it at school or have it as the Language of Learning and Teaching. The learning of the language is hampered by the fact that most teachers and student teachers speak it as a second language (Maja 2015). These two factors play a large part in preventing the country's educational success, especially as the historical inequalities in teacher education and primary education have led to a well-documented crisis in language results in primary education (Fleisch 2008; Spaull 2015). This crisis has had detrimental effects. One of these is what Fleisch, Pather and Motilal (2017) have called:

> The bimodal distribution of achievement, that is, the substantial gap between relatively well-performing learners of primarily middle-class schools and poorly performing learners attending schools in resource-constrained, rural and working-class communities. (p. 1)

According to Cochran-Smith et al. (2009:350), the 'bottom line of teaching is enhancing students' learning and their life chances by challenging the inequities of school and society'. English language skills have the capacity to affect the quality of life, opportunities, and life chances, because of English being the 'language of social mobility' (Granville et al. 1998:258).

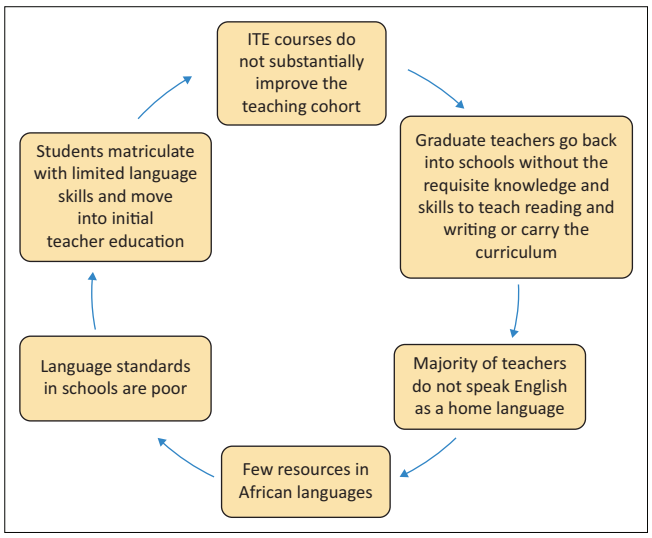
Another detrimental effect of this crisis is that as English is so economically and socially important, learners with poor English skills have reduced life chances. Therefore, by improving language education, starting with student teachers' abilities and pedagogy, the chances of diminishing existing inequities in school and society would be improved by helping learners access further education and improving their employment opportunities and life chances.

Contextual background

South Africa's educational inequality is mostly due to the continuation of apartheid in the sustaining of a 'two-tier education system' (Badat & Sayed 2014:134). This is a bifurcated system which, without redress, will continue to define results and thus determine subsequent opportunities for learners (Badat & Sayed 2014). In this way, the education system entrenches inequality. This cycle is described in Figure 1.

Inequality of teacher knowledge and universities

The unevenness of teacher preparation as a result of inequalities in initial teacher education (ITE) course content, curriculum design, hours, and credits is well documented (Bowie & Reed 2016), and could be described as the single largest obstacle affecting education in the country with statistics indicating that 'the majority of teachers (80%) lack the content and pedagogical skill to teach the subjects they are currently teaching' (Spaull & Pretorius 2019:3). The magnitude of the problem is such that it affects most South African teachers and, therefore, learners. The Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) was launched in response to growing evidence that low learner quality in South African schools was largely because of a lack of comprehension and the inability of many teachers to convey the knowledge of the subjects they teach adequately through English, the language of learning and instruction, usually after Grade 4 (Deacon 2015). This is further compounded by a lack of consensus on a formal body of knowledge for framing teacher education, and this is increased by the universities' lack of rigour in ITE coursework (Rusznyak 2016).



ITE, initial teacher education.

FIGURE 1: A cycle of poorly equipped English First Additional Language teachers with limited English language skills returning to poorly resourced schools.

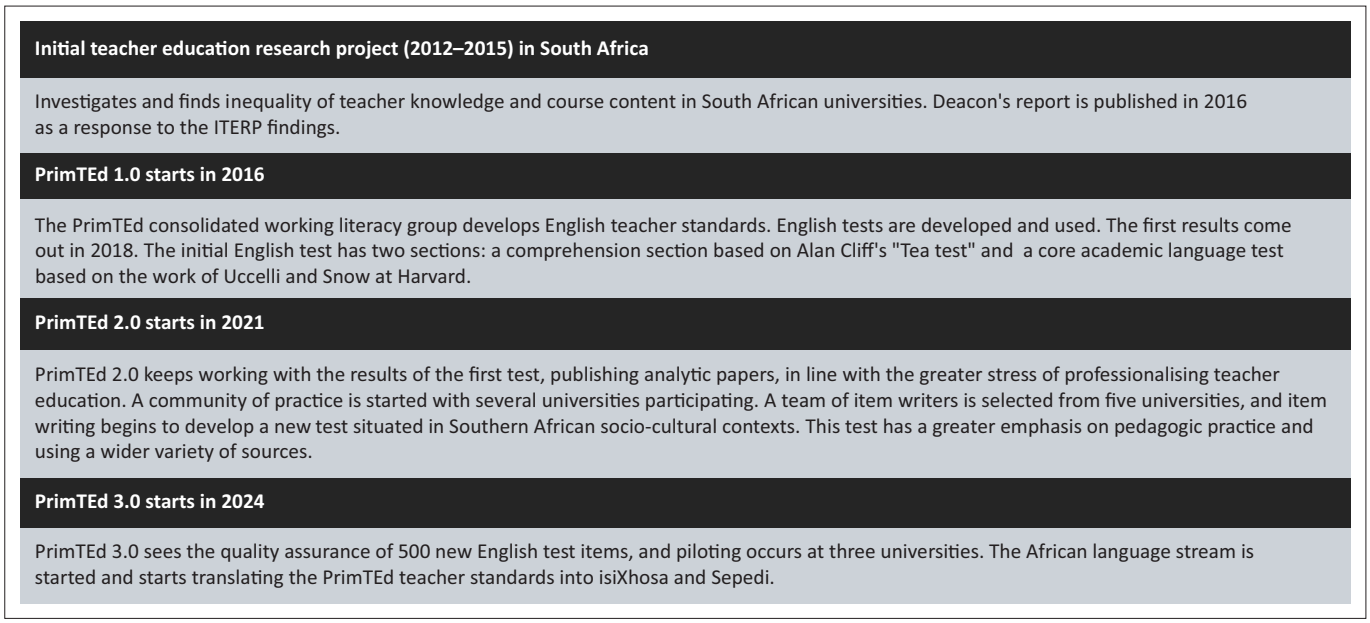
The ITERP, investigating university courses, found that:

> The ITE programmes at most of these institutions evinced little structural or conceptual coherence, often seeming to lack a broader vision or logic which could inform and weld together the teaching of subject and pedagogical knowledge with curriculum requirements and the supervision of work-integrated learning in varying educational contexts. (Deacon 2015:8)

There were also wide variations between institutions related to content, subject, and pedagogical modules. In language education, the content, duration and levels of cognitive demand of individual modules, the amount of time allocated to subject modules in relation to methodology modules, and the relationship between module credits and notional hours, differed significantly, both within and between institutions.

One of the keys to social justice in education is 'ensuring that all pupils have strong teachers and rich learning' (Cochran-Smith et al. 2009:368), and it is, of course, in ITE programmes where this preparation of teachers occurs. In South Africa, most ITE programmes have specialist English language courses available for Intermediate Phase teachers. However, there are more acute problems in the language proficiency levels of non-specialist teachers whose English language skills are unable to carry their subjects in English. This is because student teachers not specialising in English are given few opportunities to develop their English language and literacy skills. This is especially problematic given that many student teachers enter teaching programmes with poorer school-leaving results (Deacon 2015; Prince 2018), and particularly poor English language results (Bowie & Reed 2016).

The motivation for the work of the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) English language tests and workstream is to improve English language skills in the ITE degree at universities (Roberts & Mort 2023), with the larger goal of improving educational quality and creating greater equality between schools. This intention relates to education as being a public good, and to the benefit of society and all its human components, which is a social justice intention (McNamara 2008; McNamara & Knoch 2019; Roever & McNamara 2006). The PrimTEd project grew out of the work done by ITERP, with the aim of reducing the inequality of teacher knowledge described in the next section, through the development of teacher standards and assessment measuring student teacher standards. The development of the PrimTEd project in stages related to funding cycles (PrimTEd 1.0, PrimTEd 2.0 and PrimTEd 1.0) is described in Figure 2.



ITERP, Initial Teacher Education Research Project; PrimTEd, Primary Teacher Education.

FIGURE 2: The development of the Primary Teacher Education project, according to funding cycles.

Standards and assessment

Not only are standards across universities uneven in ITE, but assessment is also sometimes questionable. Deacon (2016:13) notes that ITE 'assessment instruments [*as*] indicators of competence were insufficiently explicit and lacked the detail needed to provide adequate formative and motivational feedback to students'.

Universities have considerable freedom in curriculum design and coverage. PrimTEd was construed as an interuniversity project which would, through collegiality, discussion, professional growth, and research, forge a set of commonly agreed standards for language teaching, which would positively affect curriculum design, its coverage, and approach. One of the first tasks of the PrimTEd project was to set standards for language education. This was necessary to promote equality across the ITE sector, and then to develop tests which would measure future teachers' abilities against those standards.

South Africa's poor performance in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and ITERP (Bowie & Reed 2016; Deacon 2016) highlighted the urgent need to design standards that would set out what primary school teachers needed to know in terms of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. This work was further driven by a common understanding that learner achievement (or the lack thereof) is linked to teacher knowledge (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner 2017; Shepherd 2013; Spaull 2011; Taylor 2019).

The 2017 Department of Higher Education and Training's presentation (2017) defines the importance of standards in relationship to teacher knowledge and skills:

> Teacher knowledge and practice standards are statements that describe what a teacher needs to know and be able to do to carry out their core function professionally and effectively. The statements are specific to a subject area and school phase or to a specific extended role. The statements are not tied to a particular school curriculum statement. They relate more to the academic and practical knowledge required to teach a particular subject or discipline well and, if met by teachers, will allow them to deliver the curriculum that is in place at a specific time, and to adapt effectively when the curriculum changes. (p. 3)

At the time of developing the Standards, there were 'no such knowledge and practice standards for teachers of reading and writing in South African schools' (PrimTEd Consolidated Literacy Working Group 2017:5). That standards are necessary is broadly accepted, both for professionalisation as well as to agree, and promulgate, common and established standards for literacy especially, as Taylor and Robinson (2016) state:

> It has been argued that educationalists in South Africa do not even share a common theory of literacy instruction, or well-defined reading pedagogies that are effective in suburban, township and rural schools in the country. (p. 3)

One of the first and most important developments in the PrimTEd group was to develop a set of standards for future teachers, with the goal of equitable provisioning across universities. By doing so, it was hoped that the standards would succeed in creating skilled, knowledgeable, quality future teachers. The PrimTEd Literacy Working Group began working on the standards in 2016. These Standards were developed in 2019 by the PrimTEd English Language Working Group, meaning that, for the first time, universities across South Africa were presented with a benchmark of what ITE students in language education for primary school teachers should know, and how this could be seen or evidenced. Relating to establishing educational equity and equality, the PrimTEd Teacher Standards were developed to bridge the gaps between universities' offerings. By bringing

university lecturers together to agree to the Standards, and to use them to develop and re-develop teaching course content, a greater alignment of quality could develop across universities. It is important to note, though, that the PrimTEd Teacher Standards are still considered a draft. This is (perhaps) because the Standards continue to be evaluated and refined after testing cycles.

The second aspect that was critical to the work was to establish one test, with two testing points in ITE courses – one in first year and one in fourth year – with the hope that an improvement in knowledge could be captured between the two tests (Roberts & Mort 2023). The first-year test results offer lecturers the opportunity to reconsider course content and redesign course content to address student weakness (Roberts, Moloi & Mort 2024). The test is therefore designed to measure student teacher abilities, but the results can be the impetus for positive interventions in their learning.

Theoretical framework

This article is theoretically framed by: (1) the notion of education as a public good (Biesta 2015, 2020); and (2) social justice concerns (Freire 2000). Freire notes the role of language learning historically in people's liberation, and its importance for creating economic empowerment. Furthermore, the article draws inspiration from Freire's notion of education (and education research) as a vehicle for problem-posing, which rejects a vertical framing of power relations in education but instead seeks to work in an inclusive manner. Critical Language Pedagogy is also an influence on the author's framing of this article. Critical Language Pedagogy notes and critiques the political and power relations in the context of a given society in language education (Akbari 2008:277), and in South Africa there is a history of unequal language education. In fact, the remediating of this problem is the impetus for the PrimTEd tests being developed. Critical Language Pedagogy is also mindful of language teaching, learning and research needing to be infused by 'democratic values, associated with equality, freedom, and solidarity' (Crookes 2021).

These are useful theoretical framings for this article in considering the PrimTEd project's language testing, which emerges against a background and history of inequality, both economically and educationally.

Social justice education has been framed in various ways. With regard to teacher education, it has been seen as improving student teacher welfare, preparing future teachers to work in diverse (Zeichner 2003), multicultural and multilingual environments (McDonald & Zeichner 2009; Sleeter 2008), including the development of culturally relevant pedagogy (Allen et al. 2017), working in a learner- or student-centred way, preparing student teachers to work for social justice using critical pedagogy (Bransford, Darling-Hammond & LePage 2005; Pantić & Florian 2015; Randolph & Johnson 2017), and working with local communities. Randolph and Johnson (2017:101) note that social justice education is related to four other key terms: critical pedagogy, intercultural competence (Zeichner 2003), transformative learning, and community-based learning. However, social justice is further linked to standards, student-oriented processes, and teacher-oriented processes, the latter including critical pedagogy and community-based instructional design (Randolph & Johnson 2017:102), and these terms will be used as framing devices in this article from the following perspectives: accuracy; fairness; validity and reliability; and accessibility (Moloi 2021).

Other key concepts underpinning this article are those of inclusion and fairness. These are critical aspects of test design which both ensure fairness and give the test relevance and cultural responsivity. The element of inclusion comes from the diversity of item writers, the development of culturally sensitive and realistic items based on language teaching and learning scenarios, the inclusion of a scaffolded free writing experience, and the even distribution of items of different levels.

Research methods and design

The main contributions in South Africa to this field are from research relating to primary school language education issues, and ITE. This is a discursive article which describes and discusses the PrimTEd 2.0 working group's process of designing test items to be fair, culturally relevant, inclusive, culturally responsive, educationally realistic, and, in some cases, scaffolded. This is also a reflective article cogitating the process.

Ethical considerations

This research has been approved by the University of South Africa College of Education Ethics Review Committee. The study approval number is: 2023/05/10/90502744/36/AM. This study is about community of practice and test design. This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors. However, all research around assessment is covered under this research application title 'Strengthening primary school teacher education – Assessment stream'.

Results and discussion

Having established from the outset that PrimTEd's work in language standards and assessment was set out to interrupt a trajectory of uneven teaching at universities, poor teacher knowledge, and ultimately, to improve language standards at school – all of which are social justice imperatives – we will now discuss the aspect of fairness in the work of PrimTEd with regard to diversity of test item writers, design of test items, inclusion of scaffolded items, measurement of item difficulty, and the inclusion of a variety of items at different levels, and online marking as ways of promoting fairness and inclusion, which ultimately serve a social justice aim.

	Urban universities	Rural universities	Former African only universities	'Ivy league'	Distance	Private	Other countries
Community of practice members	12	1	7	2	6	3	
Testing sites	1	1	1	-	-	3	2
Junior academic item writers	2	1	2	1	3	-	-
Experienced academics in item writing		2	2	2	1		

FIGURE 3: Involvement of different types of universities in the Primary Teacher Education project, July 2025.

Recruitment of item writers and developing Primary Teacher Education's community of practice

Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) also identified the need for maximum participation and inclusivity and invited academic staff from across all South African universities to be a part of the process. In this way, this process of broad engagement relates to community-based design. This attitude of inclusion has social justice aspects as mentioned before but also has test design implications which will be discussed later in this article.

From the outset, it must be mentioned that the broad Community of Practice group invited and encouraged wide participation from academics across universities, as shown in Figure 3. Any interested academic could, and can, join and attend the quarterly meetings. With these meetings come substantial professional opportunities, related to co-writing, sharing ideas, discussion and skills training as capacity development is one of the remits of the project. In Figure 3, the institutional diversity is made explicit.

The item writers were essentially self-selecting, as they volunteered their skills and time. What is important and necessary in the PrimTEd English assessments, is trying to imagine the diversity of student teachers at the various universities and trying to include such diversity in the Community of Practice and item writing pool. Item writers from different school teaching backgrounds and universities write test items and thus bring their different school backgrounds to the test. This is very important, as the test items developed in PrimTEd 2.0 and PrimTEd 3.0 involve pedagogic teaching scenarios. By doing this, there is an increase in cultural responsivity, which is also part of the element of fairness (Roberts & Mort 2023). Importantly the item writers also come 'at' English from different standpoints, including international teaching and educational backgrounds, different local teaching experiences, as well as different language groups (Sepedi, siSwati, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans). Zeichner (2003) wrote that in terms of social justice, variety ensures both inclusivity and a greater intercultural competence in the Community of Practice, which would ideally result in fairer and more varied test items, thus making them more reflective of real teaching scenarios which student teachers would have encountered in their own schooling (and would go on to encounter in future teaching in schools). The real-world quality of these scenarios reflects student- and teacher-oriented experiences and how these were important to, and processed in, the test item design. Randolph and Johnson (2017) claim such considerations are important in community-based instructional design. Apart from embodying the above differences in education level, background and language, the item writers also bring to the project specific and diverse language teaching and research interests, for example, translanguaging, visual literacy, creative writing, comprehension strategies, and phonics skills. These interests supply rigour and breadth to the item writing and test design. In this way, the breadth of item writers' diversity is seen as a positive strength in the design of the project, because the work thus gains in being more representational and truer to the diversity of the Southern African experience, which is an essential element of fairness. As the test and item designers gain in diversity, so does the reach of the test. Similarly, in item development, this diversity serves as a necessary background to preparing future teachers, through the test, about language difference, and the relationships between languages in a country where so many languages are spoken. There is also a measure of inclusion in the above principles. As Figure 3 shows, there were senior and more seasoned academics as well as junior academics working on the PrimTEd involved in the item-writing and quality assurance processes. For capacity development, senior and less experienced academics were paired, and worked together developing items and doing quality assurance on each other's work.

Item diversity

Another way the test embraces diversity in the interests of greater equity is in the broad range of items which were developed in the period 2024–2026 (PrimTEd 2.0 and PrimTEd 3.0). This will be shown with examples.

The PrimTEd Standards are developed with a consideration for the multicultural, multilingual context of South Africa. This is reflected by test item development. A crucial part of this is including diverse test items. The item writers achieve this by including items set in teaching scenarios that reflect the impact of multilingualism in English First Additional Language (EFAL) education. The items are contextually honest by being examples of common mother tongue interference, often reflecting the item writers' teaching experiences.

South African first additional language and home language classrooms

Additionally, the items included references to specific pedagogies, including the teaching of visual literacy. A variety of resources were used to source text examples, for example textbooks, internet sources, and academic articles. All the text examples from the variety of resources were carefully selected to ensure that test takers with varying backgrounds would be able to respond to the questions. In addition, the text examples had to reflect the context of South Africa to ensure access to a question, thus fulfilling the notion of equity.

Examples are presented of some of the test items used to demonstrate how the issues raised were upheld in testing. Box 1 is an example of how different languages influence one another. This corresponds to two of the EFAL Teaching Standards, namely: (1) Standard 1 Demonstrate knowledge of home language acquisition and additional language learning theories and research findings; and (2) with the assessment criteria of 1.1. Knowledge of home language acquisition and additional language learning theories and research findings is demonstrated. The correct answer, the key, shows the importance of including mother tongue in education, even after foundation phase, and honours South Africa's multilingual landscape. There is therefore a concern with redress and acknowledging the importance of the mother tongue (which had not been given much attention previously in South African teacher education). It is unlikely that such test items would have been developed without the inclusion of item writers who were not English mother tongue speakers. The test, while assessing also some educational value for student teachers, in that it is pointing to an inclusive attitude about language teaching, also demonstrates cultural responsivity, in that the real educational landscape contains largely EFAL learners (and teachers).

One of the PrimTEd Knowledge and Practice Standards for primary teacher education graduates, language and literacy, stipulates that teachers should be able to 'Demonstrate an understanding of the role of bilingualism and multilingualism and of standard and non-standard varieties of languages in communication and learning in South Africa'. Box 2 depicts the item that was developed in alignment with this standard, and as such, demonstrates an advocacy for social justice by including items that recognise test takers' multilingual backgrounds, including that of the learners they will teach. Box 1 demonstrates that the test recognises the influence of mother tongue in the learning process. This influence can be positive when implemented correctly. The test item in Box 1 demonstrates that allowing learners to engage in content in their mother-tongue can expand their learning opportunities. The test item in Box 2 represents South Africa's diverse classrooms, and as a result is in line with the goal of equity in testing. As has been discussed previously, most of the teachers and the learners in classrooms are not native English speakers (Maja 2015). In such cases, mother-tongue interference is not uncommon in the learning process. This type of inteference is evident in the item presented in Box 2.

The test item as shown in Box 2, while being contextually relevant, recognises the challenges of acquiring an additional language and promotes equitable learning by encouraging opportunities for learning with these challenges considered. The test item in Box 3 corresponds to PrimTEd EFAL Knowledge Standard (KS) 2: Recognise the reciprocal relationships between home and additional languages as resources for learning and development, which has the specific assessment criterion, namely Knowledge Standard KS 2.1: Knowledge of the transfer of linguistic and literacy knowledge and skills between languages, as these affect language and literacy learning in both home and additional languages, is demonstrated. Knowledge of linguistic and literacy transfer could involve describing the closeness between languages when they borrow from each other, thus bridging the gaps between the languages. The next assessment criterion is also relevant, KS 2.2: Features of the home languages that support or constrain the learning of EFAL can be described, as the finding of borrowed words from the target language in the

BOX 1: Test item illustrating Primary Teacher Education English First Additional Language Standard 1.

Mrs. Mbatha is teaching reading to an English First Additional Language Grade 4 class. To activate learners' background knowledge, Mrs. Mbatha asks learners to look at the illustrated cover of storybook and, in their home languages, make predictions about the story they will be reading. Learners are then expected to write a short paragraph prediction in their mother tongue, then to translate it into English.

In this context, Mrs. Mbatha:

A. Understands that by engaging with content first in their mother tongue learners will gain better access to learning. †
B. Understands what the story is about is dependent on learners' ability to display visual literacy skills in their mother tongue.
C. Believes that learners can only learn better if they are proficient in their mother tongue.
D. Believes that allowing learners to make predictions in their mother tongue will eliminate mother-tongue interference.

†, indicates the correct answer.

BOX 2: Test item illustrating mother-tongue interference in English First Additional Language.

Mr. Nkosi is an English teacher to a class of Grade 6 learners. The class is a mix of girls and boys from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Mr. Nkosi's mother tongue is isiZulu. During his lesson he keeps referring to Asanda, a boy in his classroom using the pronoun 'she'. One of the learners, says: 'Asanda is a boy, Sir, it's "he"'.

Mr. Nkosi used the incorrect pronoun because:

A. He has not learned the correct pronouns in English.
B. isiZulu does not have gender distinctions.†
C. In the English language pronouns are generally confusing.
D. He does not think gender classifications are important.

†, indicates the correct answer.

BOX 3: A test item illustrating Primary Teacher Education English First Additional Language Knowledge Standard 2.

Mrs Mthembu explains that when English words come into use in Nguni languages, they are adapted to 'fit' these languages. She gives some examples:

- paper in English
- iphepha in isiXhosa and in isiZulu
- papier in Afrikaans

With her explanations and examples, Mrs Mthembu could be performing three of the actions below. Which one would she not be doing?

A. Explaining different language morphologies.
B. Describing how language changes because of globalisation.
C. Explaining how one language is better than another.†
D. Creating an awareness of how languages influence each other.

†, indicates the correct answer.

home language can make the target language seem more accessible. That this is understood by the teacher is very important, and this relates to assessment criterion KS 2.4: Understanding of the vital role of the home language(s) for learners' sense of identity and belonging is demonstrated. Here this sense of belonging can be found by using the home language and showing its closeness to a word in the target language; in other words, the teacher is trying to lessen the distance between languages to make it easier for the learners to adopt the target language. This is expressed in assessment criterion KS 2.5, which is: Ways to assist learners make the transition from instruction in the home language to instruction in English can be described and demonstrated. And of course, there is a significant overlap between these assessment criteria and this one, KS 2.3: The cognitive and socio-cultural benefits of using learners' linguistic repertoires is understood and is used to support their learning the additional language in both Foundation and Intermediate Phases.

An additional standard, Teacher Knowledge Standard 17, outlines that teachers should 'demonstrate knowledge of phase appropriate features of page or screen-based visual texts, of how the relationship of verbal and visual features of texts affects meaning and of strategies to teach learners to become firstly, visually literate and subsequently, critically visually literate'. Guided by this standard, as well as EFAL Standard 6, source, design, display and manage appropriate EFAL resources were developed, as seen in Box 4.

Scaffolding

Each test contains a scaffolded writing item, on topics which are familiar, and allow for descriptive and personalised writing. This item is designed to assess student teachers' 'sound knowledge of, and ability to use, the English language' (PrimTEd EFAL Standard 3). Box 5 is an example of one of the scaffolded writing items:

This is designed as a scaffolded writing exercise: asking the student to give 'a vivid description of the memory' and 'reasons why it is your happiest memory', as well as access to the rubric to see how they will be marked, is intended to be enabling for students. In this way, it supports the idea of promoting equity and helping those who are less confident. Equity is an aspect of fairness and allied to social justice in education because, as Haas (2024:1) notes, 'equity in the classroom, or educational equity, means making sure every student has the resources and support they need to be successful'. This is an important consideration in the design and purpose of the test. Equity, in terms of opportunity for success, is an insurance measure for fairness. The test seeks to be fair through, for example, giving a writing exercise which is scaffolded, thereby assisting less confident or able writers to write more easily. Also, through 'Africanising' the test, it reflects a southern African reality, from languages used, to teaching scenarios, and it is hoped that this familiarity will enable the students taking the test to be more relaxed and do better.

BOX 4: A test item relating to visual literacy and Primary Teacher Education's English First Additional Language Standard 6.

The following guidelines appear in the Annual Teaching Plan and this relates to English Home Language Grade 4 Term 1.

Formal assessment Task 3:

- Reads poster or notices
- Pre-reading: Discusses pictures
- Discusses what the text is about
- Identifies specific information
- Interprets the information
- Discusses the purpose of the text
- Discusses some of the language use
- Identifies and discusses design features such as colour and different sizes or kinds of print (font).

Look at the visual text below and choose a statement that comments accurately on the suitability of the text:



A. The text uses bright colours, making it easier for learners to engage with the text.
B. The text allows learners to explore the relationship between verbal and visual features.†
C. Visual texts are the only texts that allow learners a real opportunity for learning.
D. Understanding an additional language is only possible when images are used.

Source: Illustration from Watt, F., 2018, *The Four Seasons music by Vivaldi*, Usbourne, London, viewed n.d., from https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/81uFuTXPnZL._SL1500_.jpg

†, indicates the correct answer.

BOX 5: Creative writing test item example demonstrating scaffolding.

Write a 130–150 word paragraph on the following topic:

My happiest memory of my childhood.

You may give your paragraph a different title or use the one above. Your aim is to provide readers with the following: (1) a vivid description of the memory and (2) reasons why it is your happiest memory.

Your paragraph will be assessed according to the rubric below:

Elements assessed:

Content (/30):

- Description (/15)
- Reason (/15)

Language (/20):

- Choice and use of vocabulary (/10)
- Grammatical accuracy, punctuation, cohesion (/10)

Total: /50

Measuring item difficulty

Another item of the test design which needs to be mentioned is the writers' weighting of their own items as easy, medium, or difficult. This weighting is informed by studying the results of the first test and seeing which the students had found easy, and which they had found difficult. These weightings of test items are also quality assured by other item writers, to check that the item writers have indeed placed their items at the right level. In the arrangement of the tests, an even spread of each difficulty level was included, for the purpose of fairness. This allows disaggregated results, which will give more detail to the university lecturers and course convenors who will use the test results to enrich courses.

Online marking to avoid bias

Another important aspect is that the test is done and marked online. By testing and marking online, the issue of 'inter-marker [*un*]reliability' (Reed et al. 2003) is avoided. Reed et al. (2003) also noted the difficulty of marking qualitative language work and concluded that a '"consistency" of assessment within and across universities aspired to by quality assurers … is difficult to achieve' (p. 27). Therefore, online marking, because of the avoidance of bias and subjectivity, is seen as another measure of fairness.

Conclusion

Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) is promoting English language and literacies testing in ITE as a way of overcoming 'systemic inequities or injustices' (De Almeida Mattos 2014:130). As McDonald and Zeichner (2009:600) observe:

> Teacher education programmes have a unique opportunity to improve the educational opportunities of students; however, they cannot go it alone. Social justice teacher education efforts must join with other levels of the educational system as well as organizations in the public and private sector to improve the educational opportunities. Testing for knowledge is purposeful in that knowledge is taken to be 'always based on the discursive rules of a particular community, and is thus ideological.' (De Almeida Mattos 2014:130)

By having a broad diversity of communities, language groups and teaching backgrounds represented by the PrimTEd item writers, it is hoped that test items can reach, and be representative of, particular communities. Finally, unless levels at which students are functioning are ascertained, improvements cannot be made. Realistic reporting offers ITE language lecturers the possibility of addressing shortfalls in knowledge and understanding on the ITE courses. Ultimately assessment of language skills of student teachers on initial education courses is to pragmatically enable redress through: (1) closing the gaps in what is offered in language teacher education across universities; (2) promoting African languages, varieties of English and the use of teachers and learners' full linguistic repertoires; and lastly, (3) interrupting a trajectory of teachers with limited language and pedagogic knowledge and skills entering the teaching profession (Taylor 2019). The assessment therefore has an inclusive aspect of wanting a broad improvement in language standards in South Africa (Roberts & Mort 2023). The PrimTEd assessments thus present a hopeful opportunity to improve future South African teachers' English, which would in turn improve learners' abilities, results and opportunities.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Thelma K.B. Mort: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Duduzile P. Zwane: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology; Writing – original draft. Hayley van der Haar: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to restrictions and are available from the corresponding author, Thelma K.B. Mort, upon reasonable request.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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