

Mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the foundation phase: A comparison of classroom reality with the South African language-in-education policy

**Author:**Madoda Cekiso¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Applied Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Madoda Cekiso,
cekisomp@tut.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 13 July 2025

Accepted: 12 Nov. 2025

Published: 06 Mar. 2026

How to cite this article:

Cekiso, M., 2026, 'Mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the foundation phase: A comparison of classroom reality with the South African language-in-education policy', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 16(1), a1777. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v16i1.1777>

Copyright:

© 2026. The Author.

Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Background: Research shows that mother-tongue instruction enhances reading comprehension, cognitive development, and self-concept. It also makes learning other languages easier by giving learners a solid foundation. These findings lend credence to the claim that mother-tongue instruction has a positive impact on learning outcomes.

Aim: Thus, the goal of the current study was to compare the South African language-in-education policy requirements with the teachers' experiences of teaching learners in their mother tongue.

Setting: The study targeted two schools, with three groups per level (i.e. Grades 1, 2, and 3) in each school in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape province.

Methods: A case-study research methodological design was used, and the study was qualitative in nature. Data were gathered through interviews with six foundation-phase teachers who were purposefully chosen. Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis was used as a framework for the study. Data analysis was done using content analysis.

Results: The findings revealed that learners were unfamiliar with some isiXhosa home-language vocabulary, and other isiXhosa vocabulary challenges were associated with teaching numeracy. The results also demonstrated that learners had trouble pronouncing, reading, and spelling words in isiXhosa. The results also showed that teachers faced difficulties with translation because they were not trained to use their mother tongue as a teaching medium.

Conclusion: As the learners at this level are not proficient in English, the study concluded that even though many foundation-phase teachers believe that learners comprehend English first additional language (EFAL) more than their mother tongue, this does not equate to using EFAL as a medium of instruction.

Contribution: The study's findings add to the body of knowledge showing that teaching in the mother tongue strengthens cultural identity and self-esteem and builds a strong cognitive and linguistic foundation.

Keywords: mother-tongue teaching; curriculum; home language; curriculum designers; policy makers; educational system.

Introduction

Section 29(2) of the South African Constitution (1996) stipulates that everyone has the right to receive education in the official language of their choice if that is reasonably possible. The Constitution further states that the state must implement this right while taking equity and the negative effects of apartheid into account. Although this constitutional right seems reasonable, there have been challenges in putting it into practice. Issues in South Africa include inadequately trained teachers for mother-tongue instruction and a lack of suitable educational resources. Challenges facing mother-tongue instruction stem from negative social attitudes that see English as the language of advancement. Significant obstacles also include inadequate funding for the educational development of African languages and poor language policy oversight (Kangira 2016; Mphahlele, Munyaka & Moshuba 2022).

According to several scholars, the most effective way for an educational system to teach children to the highest level possible, given a certain amount of time and resources, is to teach them in the language they were raised with from an early age (a mother tongue, or L1)

(Hugo 2020; Pinnock 2008; Stoop 2017). Hugo (2020) is of the view that home language skills are crucial when children start school and pick up new ideas and abilities such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Hugo (2020) further points out that South African policies, such as the South African Language in Education Policy (Department of Basic Education 1997), safeguard the rights of learners from Grades R to 3 to receive instruction in their mother tongue or home language. Consequently, in South Africa, the learners' mother tongue, which may be one of the country's 11 official languages, is usually utilised as the language of learning and teaching during the Foundation Phase (FP). According to the Department of Basic Education (2010), a learner's home language is the one they speak the most at home. Because they both refer to the language that a person learns initially, usually from their parents or family at home, mother tongue and home language are used interchangeably.

Learners who are taught in their mother tongues before learning other languages improve as they are more likely to continue their education (Ball 2014; Nishanthi 2020; Quattara et al. 2025). Hugo (2020) states that using learners' mother tongue on the first day of school is advantageous for South African children. Similarly, Kioko (2015) acknowledged the advantages of using the learner's home language during the early school years, stating that it increases the likelihood that the learner will participate in the learning process. Kioko (2015) further says that when a learner moves to a second language, they do not need to be taught the same concepts and abilities that were taught in their mother tongue.

The use of home languages as languages of learning and teaching in the FP has its advantages, but it also has drawbacks. According to Nishanthi (2020), learners' mother tongue plays a crucial role in defining their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, fluency in the mother tongue helps learners by connecting them to their culture, promoting improved cognitive development, and aiding in language acquisition, according to Nishanthi (2020). As already mentioned above, the use of a mother tongue as a language of learning and teaching has its own drawbacks. According to Mularsih, Satyarini and Faisal (2024), lack of standardised resources, such as textbooks and materials, inadequate training for teachers to teach in the mother tongue, a small or non-existent standardised vocabulary, unfavourable community perceptions of foreign languages as superior, and the difficulty of striking a balance between linguistic diversity and instructional needs when there are several local languages are some of the disadvantages of using a mother tongue as a language of learning and teaching.

Learners who are starting school for the first time have a greater vocabulary in English than in their mother tongue, claims Mashiya (2011). According to Mashiya (2011), learners already recite the days, weeks, and months of the year in English when they start school, but cannot do the same in their mother tongue. Feza (2016) raised a similar concern, noting that curriculum designers, researchers, and policy makers have different perspectives on the literacies that

young children experience. A similar study on the difficulties in teaching mother tongue in isiZulu was carried out by Khanyile and Awung (2023). Their study's findings showed poorly tailored terminology for teaching mother tongues, and the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with – the isiZulu used in textbooks and teacher guides.

The findings specifically showed that the isiZulu that teachers taught the learners differed from the conversational isiZulu that they would use at home. This created a completely different atmosphere at school and made teaching more difficult for the teachers, who still had to translate the material into standard, contemporary isiZulu. Feza (2016) made a similar finding in a study on the fundamental numeracy skills of isiXhosa reception year learners in South Africa. According to the study's findings, isiXhosa learners bring counting concepts to the reception class that were not developed in their mother tongue but rather in English. Learners successfully counted 55 counters using English number names, but they were unable to do the same in their mother tongue, isiXhosa. In particular, the learners could only count in isiXhosa up to 10.

The above situation begs the question as to whether the home language is beneficial in supporting learners in the FP, since in some instances, they battle learning in their mother tongue and prefer English. However, the purpose of this study is not to dissuade the use of home languages in the FP but to show the other side of the coin. This is because most studies only highlight the benefits of using home languages during the FP. As a result, there is little research on the detrimental effects of mother tongue instruction in the FP in South Africa. Among the few existing studies are Hugo (2020); Hugo and Masalena (2021); Mashiya (2011); Feza (2016); Khanyile and Awung (2023), and Cekiso, Meyiwa and Mashige (2019). To contribute to bridging this gap, the current study asked FP teachers to share their experiences teaching in their learners' mother tongue. It has already been mentioned that the South African Language in Education Policy stipulates that the home language be used as a medium of instruction from Grade R to Grade 3. As teachers are directly responsible for implementing new policies in the classroom, their opinions are crucial for effective policy implementation. The success of the policy is greatly impacted by its comprehension, acceptance, and flexibility. The study aimed to address the following research questions to accomplish this goal:

- *What are the teachers' perspectives on the use of home language as a medium of instruction in the FP?*
- *How do classroom practices reflect or diverge from the principles of additive bilingualism promoted in the South African language-in-education policy?*

Literature review

The benefits of home-language instruction

Research continuously demonstrates that teaching in a child's mother tongue has several positive effects on learning, such as enhanced comprehension, better academic achievement,

greater engagement, higher self-esteem, and a more solid basis for learning other languages (Ball 2014; Dick 2024; Malindi, Ndebele & Gobingca 2023; Phiri, Chanda & Mwanapabu 2024).

According to Kioko (2015), a learner who is proficient in one language will acquire the ability to read and write in a new language more quickly. Kioko (2015) further states that this is because the learner already understands that letters stand for sounds; the only new information they require is the letter sounds of the new language.

A study by Malindi et al. (2023) sought to understand how teachers felt about the implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education. The results showed that, despite the opinions of many teachers, using one's mother tongue is advantageous for all learners in all subjects. Dick (2024) investigated the reasons behind children's acquisition of their mother tongue. Dick (2024) stated that young children's learning potential and abilities can be limited by a lack of access to educational materials in their mother tongue, which can demotivate them and restrict their academic endeavours. Dick (2024) also noted that learners are more likely to comprehend the material being taught and are less likely to become discouraged or demotivated when they are taught in a language they are familiar with. This can result in a greater sense of accomplishment and a more positive attitude towards learning.

An investigation into the significance of learning one's mother tongue was carried out by Nishanthi (2020). According to Nishanthi (2020), a person's mother tongue can help frame their thoughts and feelings. He goes on to say that a child's first understanding of the world around them is based on the language they hear their mother using. Based on the findings of his research, Nishanthi (2020) suggested that language policies should consider mother-tongue learning to raise the standard of education. Nishanthi (2020) goes on to say that educational models that disregard the mother tongue in the formative years can be counterproductive, ineffectual, and detrimental to learners' learning.

Phiri et al. (2024) carried out another study on the benefits of using a mother tongue as a teaching medium. The study concentrated on how learners' academic performance was affected when local languages were used as a medium of instruction. According to Phiri et al. (2024), employing local languages as a teaching medium can have a positive and substantial impact on learners' academic performance. Phiri et al. (2024) point out that using one's mother tongue as a teaching language facilitates communication between the home and school settings and increases parental involvement in education. According to Phiri et al. (2024), teachers can foster a positive learning atmosphere where learners feel empowered to express themselves with confidence by using local languages.

According to recent studies, there are several obstacles to mother-tongue education, such as a shortage of teachers

with the necessary training, a dearth of teaching resources in the mother tongue, unfavourable attitudes in the community towards foreign languages, and poorly adapted terminology for ideas in subjects such as maths and life skills. These issues make it more difficult to implement mother-tongue education policies effectively, especially as English frequently takes over as the primary language of instruction, which causes problems for students (Cekiso et al. 2019; Igarashi, Maulana & Suryadarma 2024; Khanyile & Awung 2023).

Discussion regarding the promotion of African languages in South Africa focuses on the need to balance linguistic rights and cultural heritage with the perceived economic advantages and global supremacy of English (Ntombela 2024). Ntombela (2024) further states that the above situation creates a conflict between the language policies established in the post-apartheid era and the ongoing reinforcement of colonial linguistic hierarchies within the realms of education and government.

Critics contend that the emphasis on English obstructs the growth of indigenous languages and reinforces inequality (Devkota & Neupane 2025; Mabela & Ditsele 2024; Munyai & Phooko 2021). However, supporters of English as the medium of instruction argue that decolonising knowledge systems to make African languages academic tools is challenging due to a lack of resources, intellectualisation, and established institutional support for these languages in academia, making the shift appear daunting or impractical (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir 2001; Maharajh & Chilli 2021; Magwa 2015; Mudau 2019; Negash 2011). While the above-mentioned studies recognise the cognitive benefits of mother-tongue instruction, they emphasise the practical difficulties of developing comprehensive African language academic content and training, which makes maintaining English as a familiar language of instruction seem easier.

Some scholars like Raton, Bagares and Soberano (2024); Sun (2025); Pantic and Florian (2015); Iwuanyamwu (2023); and Mabese (2017) believe that in addition to being a useful pedagogical tool for academic success, mother tongue teaching advances social justice by combating linguistic oppression and fostering inclusive settings where all languages are respected and valued, as well as cultural equity by validating learners' identities and heritage. These scholars further reveal that this method views linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a weakness, empowering underserved communities and fostering a more equitable educational system.

In addition, many researchers like Mutongoza et al. (2023), De Vos and Riedel (2022), Nyoni (2023), and Quan, Fambasayi and Ferreira (2024) are of the view that mother-tongue instruction is seen as helpful for decolonisation and transformation in South Africa because it challenges the historical dominance of Afrikaans and English in education, fosters cultural identity, and improves learning comprehension through language familiarity. According to these studies,

in line with the objectives of decolonisation and transformation, South Africa can address its multilingual reality, promote self-confidence, and establish a more inclusive and equitable educational system by emphasising mother tongue teaching.

Theoretical framework

The current study was grounded in Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which was developed in 1979. According to Cummins (1979), the main idea of the hypothesis is that only when mother-tongue proficiency is sufficiently advanced can bilingualism be achieved in a way that is both cognitively and academically advantageous. Cummins (1979) claims that two theories are developed and integrated to reach this conclusion. These are the developmental interdependence hypothesis and the threshold hypothesis. According to the developmental interdependence hypothesis, the type of competence that has already been established in the mother tongue at the time of intensive exposure to the second language influences the development of second-language proficiency. According to the threshold hypothesis, a bilingual learner may need to reach certain linguistic proficiency levels to prevent cognitive disadvantages and to enable the potentially positive effects of bilingualism to affect their academic and cognitive functioning. Cummins (1979) claims that these theories are incorporated into a bilingual education model that explains learning outcomes because of the interplay between educational treatment, child input, and background.

Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which holds that academic and cognitive abilities acquired in a learner's mother tongue can become a common underlying proficiency in a second language, is pertinent to mother-tongue education. This theory shows that investing in mother-tongue proficiency enhances a learner's capacity to acquire other language proficiency, supporting mother-tongue instruction as a basis for robust second-language acquisition and overall academic success. The linguistic interdependence theory was deemed relevant for the current study as it aligns with the South African language-in-education policy.

To address the disparities that existed during the apartheid era, the South African language-in-education policy for the FP (Grades R–3) stipulates that every learner has the right to be taught in their mother tongue (South African language-in-education policy [1997]).

Research method and design

The study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research describes and explains relationships, individual experiences, and group norms (Oranga & Matere 2023). It can be done to learn more about people's motivations, behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. As the study's objective was to investigate FP teachers' opinions regarding the use of home languages as a medium of instruction, the qualitative

approach was deemed appropriate for this investigation. The study employed a qualitative case study design. According to McCombes (2023), a case study is an in-depth analysis of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organisation, or phenomenon.

Data were gathered via interviews. According to Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020), interviews are used to gain a deeper understanding of an individual's subjective experiences, beliefs, and motivations. In order to get the teachers' thoughts on using the mother tongue to support teaching and learning, the interviews were pertinent.

Participants

Every participant taught (FP) learners and was a FP (Grades 1–3) teacher. Their mother tongue, isiXhosa, coincided with their learners' mother tongue. From two schools, six teachers were chosen. The plan was to target two schools, with three groups per level (i.e. Grades 1, 2, and 3) in each school. Two participants stated that they held a Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase) and were trained to teach in the FP. Due to a lack of qualified FP teachers, four teachers who had been trained to teach in the Senior Phase chose to teach in the FP instead. There were two male teachers among the participants, whose ages ranged from 28 years to 54 years. All participants preferred interviews in their mother tongue, isiXhosa, as well as English. Each one-on-one interview lasted roughly 30 min – 35 min. The researcher created questions based on the study's goals to direct interviews that took place between January and February 2025. The interviews were conducted in the participants' schools in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape province.

Participants who gave their informed consent were informed about ethical issues related to data access, confidentiality, and anonymity before any data were collected. The participants granted permission for the interviews to be recorded. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Content analysis is a research technique used to find patterns in recorded communication, according to Luo (2023). Luo (2023) claims that content analysis can be used to measure how frequently specific words, phrases, topics, or ideas appear in a collection of texts, whether they are historical or modern. To analyse data, the recorded data were first transcribed because the participants gave their consent to be recorded during the interview sessions. I familiarised myself with the data by going through it multiple times. I then created a deductive and inductive coding scheme, applied codes to the text, and methodically coded the data by defining units of analysis. Lastly, I examined the coded data by finding trends and created themes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

(No. UWA001-23). The goal of the study was explained to the participants, and they were informed of their right to discontinue participation at any time. Participants were given a consent form to complete that ensured their confidentiality and anonymity. During the interview process, the participants gave the researcher permission to record their answers.

Results

The findings presented in this section are based on the themes that emerged from the teachers' responses to the open-ended questions. The author's narratives are supported by a few exact quotes. The participants' identities were concealed by using the code 'P' followed by a number. 'P' stands for participant in this context. The data presented below in themes correspond with the research questions, which focused on the teachers' perspectives on using home language as a medium of instruction in the FP and whether their classroom practices reflect or diverge from the principles of additive bilingualism promoted in Language in Education Policy (LiEP).

Theme 1: Learners' unfamiliarity with isiXhosa vocabulary

Every participant acknowledged that the FP learners faced difficulties with the isiXhosa home-language vocabulary. This was because the words used for different concepts were new to the FP learners' vocabulary. In other words, FP teachers were unable to use the learners' home vocabulary as background information. FP teachers hinted at this circumstance by pointing out that learners do not speak the same isiXhosa language at home as is used in the curriculum or workbooks. As the language they were meant to use as a starting point to help the learners learn becomes unfamiliar to them, this presents a challenge for the FP teachers. Responding to the question on the experience of using isiXhosa as a medium of instruction:

'Learners experience a problem regarding the lessons on colours. At home, they use English to describe colours, but at school, they are introduced to isiXhosa vocabulary for colours. For example, the word "blue" is the common word learners use at home, but the isiXhosa material refers to the new isiXhosa word "*umbala osibhakabhaka*" [colour that looks like the sky]. Again, at home learners use the English word "grey" but at school they are introduced to the isiXhosa word "*umbala onjengehobe*" [colour that looks like a dove]. The situation is worsened by the fact that isiXhosa has different dialects. Some learners are told by their parents that "grey" in isiXhosa is "*Ngwevu*." This confuses learners as the language they speak with their parents at home is not accommodated by the school environment.' (P6, male, 34 years old)

A participant expressed a similar sentiment:

'The colour "yellow" is problematic for the learners. Learners are familiar with the English word "yellow" and not "*Mthubi*" which is the isiXhosa word that is used at school. In other workbooks, "*tyheli*" and "*iqanda*" are used for "yellow." Learners come across these new isiXhosa words only when they come to school for the first time. It is like we teach a new language.' (P3, female, 54 years old)

Adding her perspective on the matter:

'Sometimes, experience a challenge with the borrowed words which are written in isiXhosa. For example, "*ipalafini*" for paraffin, "*khompuyutha*" for computer, "*powusta*" for poster, "*tshiphusi*" for chips, "*sangweji*" for sandwich, "*kliniki*" for clinic and "*khrayoni*" for crayon. At home, learners are used to the English version. I have also discovered that even in cases where the isiXhosa vocabulary is used, it is not the same version as the one used at home. For example, "*inkonkxa*" [tin]. Learners are used to "*itoti*" at home. Also, "*umxokoletwana*" is not a familiar word, the familiar word is "*ukudibanisa*" [to add]. Another confusing word is "*ukungcamla*" [to taste]. Learners often associate this word with the grass. This is due to the fact that in isiXhosa, the word "*ngca*" refers to grass. At home, learners use the word "taste," not "*ukungcamla*.'" (P5, female, 43 years old)

Theme 2: IsiXhosa vocabulary challenges associated with teaching numeracy

Using isiXhosa as the medium of instruction, teachers also reported difficulties in teaching numeracy. They explained this difficulty by saying that learners at home are more accustomed to counting in English than in isiXhosa. Consequently, they already possess some English counting abilities when they first enter school. On the other hand, FP learners find it challenging to count in isiXhosa, which is a language that teachers are expected to teach them in school. In this discussion a participant said:

'The isiXhosa counting like "*inye* [one], *zimbini* [two], *zintathu* [three], *zine* [four], *zintlanu* [five], *zintandathu* [six], *zisixhenkxe* [seven], *zisibhozo* [eight], *zilithoba* [nine], *zilishumi* [ten]" is not easy for the learners who are used to counting in English. The situation becomes worse when they proceed to numbers beyond ten like "*ishumi elinanye* [eleven], *ishumi elinesibini* [twelve]" and so on.' (P1, female, 32 years old)

'It becomes a problem to teach numeracy using isiXhosa as learners are familiar with the English numbers and shapes. Explaining "*unxantathu*" for the rectangle is difficult because learners are used to the rectangle at home. It becomes worse when another isiXhosa word "*umbhoxobuxande*" is used for the rectangle. For the same word, rectangle, other workbooks recommend the use of "*irectangle-uxande*." There is also another edition that recommends "*rekthengile*" for rectangle.' (P2, male, 31 years old)

Contributing to the subject, P4 indicated:

'It is challenging to teach money in isiXhosa. The word "*ingqekembe* [coin]" is foreign to the learners as they use coins at home. Also, the word "*sombulula*" for count becomes difficult as learners do not use it at home. At home learners are used to rands not pounds as it is the case with the isiXhosa material. Even as teachers we are not used to "*iiponti*" [pounds]. We know how to write money in rands e.g., R10.00. As teachers we do not know how to write money in pounds. Learners at home are used to 10c not "*isheleni*" which is available in the isiXhosa material.' (P4, female, 47 years old)

Theme 3: Challenges associated with isiXhosa pronunciation, reading and spelling

Participants disclosed that some isiXhosa words were difficult for learners to pronounce. It was noted that compared with English words, IsiXhosa words were too lengthy and

challenging to read, write, or pronounce. The fact that those isiXhosa words are no longer used in the communities is another contributing factor. The participants cited words like 'zisixhenkxe [seven]' and 'mboxobuxande [rectangle]'.

Responding to the question about her experience with isiXhosa pronunciation, P3 said:

'Learners experience a problem with pronouncing, reading and writing some isiXhosa words as they are not familiar with them in their home environment. For example, 756 becomes "*amashumi asixhenkxe, anamashumi amahlanu anesithandathu*." It becomes a whole sentence in isiXhosa, whereas in English it becomes seven hundred and fifty-six. Only 20% of the learners in the FP would master this in isiXhosa, but in English, they all master it easily. When explaining numbers, isiXhosa *siyatsala* [it takes long to explain numbers in isiXhosa].' (P3, female, 54 years old)

Theme 4: Challenges associated with translation

According to the participants, they had to use translation to make their lessons understandable in the classroom. Although this action is not in line with the stipulations of the South African language-in-education policy, teachers felt that translation was necessary to make their lessons effective. In the context of the current study, teachers used translation as a strategy to ensure comprehension when delivering lessons in isiXhosa. Given that many teachers lacked confidence in their ability to translate, this was a regrettable circumstance. Despite not having a formal translation course, the teachers did their best to convey the message. To this end, P2 said:

'Sometimes I am forced to use English words in order to explain the isiXhosa words. I use translation to make meaning for learners and to break down barriers when the isiXhosa language of my learners is still developing. Another situation that forces me to use translation as a teaching strategy is that the learners' spoken isiXhosa language in their homes differs from the one, they use in their workbooks. Their native isiXhosa is the one that has changed over time and incorporated many English words. On the other hand, the workbooks use an outdated form of isiXhosa. For the learners, this situation poses a challenge and forces me to resort to translation to make learners understand the message I am trying to put across.' (P2, male, 31 years old)

A participant expressed a similar sentiment:

"Maybe when you are told that learners are taught in their mother tongue in the foundation phase you might think that it is smooth sailing and without problems. Sometimes you feel like you are teaching these learners in a foreign language and yet you are teaching them in their mother tongue. Seemingly, their mother tongue has not developed to the level it is supposed to be as it competes with English vocabulary in their communities. As teachers we must translate, and we are not good in translation. We must do this because the isiXhosa language we teach is not the same with the one spoken by learners at home." IsiXhosa language has adopted many English words. For example, many isiXhosa speakers would understand money and time in English better than in isiXhosa. Therefore, as teachers we have to translate those English words learners are familiar with to isiXhosa and many times we battle when it comes to finding direct translation.' (P1, female, 32 years old)

Theme 5: Insufficient teacher training in using a mother tongue as a medium of instruction

Many teachers reported not receiving adequate training to teach using isiXhosa as the medium of instruction. This lack of preparedness means that they may not be equipped with all the necessary skills to teach complex topics in the learners' mother tongue. They ended up 'muddling through', which will probably have a detrimental effect on the process of teaching and learning. Responding to the question that sought her views on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, P3 said:

'I struggle to teach in isiXhosa because at university I was not trained to teach in isiXhosa. What I can say is that all what I am doing depends on the experience I have gathered as a FP teacher. If learners understand what I am trying to say, then life goes on. Even the workshops conducted by our subject advisors do not help much as they do not cover all the words that frustrate us in the classroom.' (P3, female, 54 years old)

A participant expressed a similar concern:

'The training of teachers at Colleges of Education *yenziwa* [is done] in English. But they are expected to teach in isiXhosa in their classrooms. That situation makes it hard to teach in the FP. However, I try to speak clearly and slowly but I am not confident enough in what I am doing. Sometimes the incorporation of visuals assists me to explain the meaning of some words. I also use gestures and other actions to help learners understand. What is important is to break down language [*isiXhosa*] barriers in the classroom.' (P5, female, 43 years old)

Discussion of findings

Based on the study's findings, it is evident that teachers experienced challenges in using isiXhosa as a medium of instruction in the (FP). According to the study's findings, FP learners found it difficult to understand new isiXhosa vocabulary. Learners were unable to use their home language as a resource for learning new concepts because many of the isiXhosa words used in the workbook were unfamiliar to them. This was because learners speak a different form of isiXhosa at home than what is written in the workbooks. The findings of a study by Khanyile and Awung (2023) corroborate this conclusion. According to their study's findings, the teachers were not happy with the isiZulu that was used in teacher guides and textbooks, as it differed from the everyday isiZulu that learners would use at home. This finding is also in line with the results of a study conducted by Mashiya (2011) on the factors inhibiting the use of mother tongue as the language of learning and teaching in rural FP classes. The findings of the study showed that learners lacked their mother tongue vocabulary.

The findings of the study also showed that some of the challenges with the use of isiXhosa as a medium of instruction were associated with the teaching of numeracy. In particular, the results showed that learners were having trouble counting in isiXhosa. This difficulty was noted in some earlier studies. For example, a study on the fundamental numeracy skills of

isiXhosa reception year learners was carried out by Feza in 2016. Feza concluded that only English numerals were used in their community after observing that learners showed that they had been exposed to numeracy that is communicated in English rather than their home language.

Cekiso et al. (2019) came to similar conclusions. According to their study's findings, teachers found it extremely challenging to teach mathematics in isiXhosa because there was a dearth of vocabulary that matched the concepts of these subjects. This finding is also in line with Cummins' (1979) linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which was used as a theoretical framework for the current study. According to this theory, bilingualism can only be attained in a way that is beneficial for cognition and academic performance when mother-tongue proficiency is sufficiently advanced. This is troubling because the findings show that the learners were having difficulty in their mother tongue, particularly with vocabulary. It indicates that they lacked the ability to utilise their mother tongue as a tool.

The findings further revealed that some isiXhosa words were difficult for learners to pronounce, read and spell. It was noted that compared with English words, isiXhosa words were too lengthy and challenging to read, write, and pronounce. This finding aligns with the results of a study on innovative methods and strategies for teaching beginning reading to African children conducted by Cronje (2021). The study's findings demonstrated that because the letter sounds in English and African languages differ, the phonics method used to teach reading in English is inappropriate for African children. Similar findings were also obtained by Daries and Probert (2020). Their study's results demonstrated that the agglutinative, conjunctive nature of isiXhosa orthography, along with the presence of several complex graphemes, makes spelling more difficult for isiXhosa learners.

The study's results also demonstrated that to make their lessons intelligible in the classroom, teachers turned to translation. This result aligns with the findings of a study by Cekiso et al. (2019). The study's findings demonstrated that translating mathematical ideas from English into isiXhosa was the primary source of most of the difficulties mentioned by teachers. Teachers found this difficult because they lacked training in translation. The results of a study by Mashegoane (2017) on the fallacy of teaching science and maths in the mother tongue are also supported by this finding. The study's findings showed that learning is hampered by the fact that hundreds of languages worldwide lack direct translations for fundamental scientific and mathematical terms.

Some teachers disclosed that they were never trained to use their mother tongue isiXhosa as a teaching medium, referring to their initial training on the subject. Given that they are supposed to teach in the FP in the learners' mother

tongue, this is concerning. Feza (2016) has noted the discrepancy between the policy and the actual classroom practices. The study's findings demonstrated that the learners under investigation had a different language tool when they started formal school than what was required by policy, because they appeared to have learned more English concepts than isiXhosa concepts prior to starting school.

Despite the teachers' consensus that the learners understood more English words than isiXhosa words, in my view, this should be interrogated as these learners do not have any proficiency in the English language. The acquisition of the English vocabulary from the home environment does not guarantee English proficiency in the context of the current study. The knowledge of individual English words should be separated from English proficiency. There is no guarantee that if the learners are taught in English as a medium of instruction, they might perform better. Maybe the English vocabulary learners have already acquired from their environment should be used simultaneously with the isiXhosa vocabulary. To this end, the teachers complained about the use of different words in different textbooks. It means there should be consistency in the use of isiXhosa vocabulary to avoid confusion. The current study's overall conclusions showed that, to a certain degree, the FP teachers' classroom experiences and the language policy, which mandates that learners be taught in their mother tongue, do not align.

To make sure that learning took place in their classrooms, teachers had to rely on their prior teaching experience.

Conclusion

By navigating the complexities of using a learner's mother tongue as a medium of instruction, this article has shed light on the viewpoints of teachers regarding this approach. The teachers revealed that learners were unfamiliar with isiXhosa vocabulary. It means that the isiXhosa used in the textbooks was foreign to the learners, as many isiXhosa words used in textbooks had been replaced by English vocabulary in everyday language. The findings also revealed that isiXhosa vocabulary challenges manifested themselves in the teaching of numeracy. Learners, in their home environment, no longer use isiXhosa numbers while counting but use English numbers. Teachers also mentioned challenges associated with isiXhosa pronunciation, reading and spelling. This challenge occurred because of too lengthy isiXhosa words as compared with English words. This situation was further complicated by the fact that the learners were not exposed to these isiXhosa words in their home environment. The results also revealed that teachers resorted to translation for the sake of intelligibility. The teachers also cited a lack of training on using a home language as a medium of instruction. This is a cause for concern, as the success of implementing the language policy depends on teachers' ability to deliver lessons in the mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the teachers who participated in the study. Also, the author would like to thank Prof. C. Uwah for the role he played during ethics application for this article.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Madoda Cekiso: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Madoda Cekiso, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author 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 author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Ball, J., 2014, *Children learn better in their mother tongue*, viewed 12 June 2025, from <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/children-learn-better-their-mother-tongue>.
- Brock-Utne, B. & Holmarsdottir, H.B., 2001, 'The choice of English as medium instruction and its effects on the African languages in Namibia', *International Review of Education* 47, 293–322. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017905910662>
- Busetto, L., Wick, W. & Gumbinger, C., 2020, *How to use and assess qualitative research methods*, viewed 15 June 2025, from <https://neurorespect.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>.
- Cekiso, M., Meyiwa, T. & Mashige, M., 2019, 'Foundation phase teachers' experiences with instruction in the mother tongue in the Eastern Cape', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v9i1.658>
- Cronje, M.M., 2021, 'New approach and strategies for teaching African children initial reading', *Literator* 42(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v42i1.1716>
- Cummins, J., 1979, *Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children*, *Bilingual Education Paper Series* 3(2), 1–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1169960>
- Daries, M.A. & Probert, T.N., 2020, 'A linguistic analysis of spelling errors in Grade 3 isiXhosa home-language learners', *Reading & Writing* 11(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v11i1.265>
- De Vos, M. & Riedel, K., 2022, 'Decolonizing and transforming curricula for teaching linguistics and language in South Africa: Taking stock and charting the way forward', *Transformation in Higher Education* 8, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v8i0.200>
- Department of Basic Education, 1997, *Language in education policy*, viewed 15 July 2025, from https://www.google.com/search?q=department+of+education+1997+language+in+education+policy&sca_esv=e0ee5455e7f1c925&sxsr.
- Department of Basic Education, 2010, *The status of the language of learning and teaching in South African public schools: A quantitative overview*, viewed 14 June 2025, from <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/Status%20of%20LOLT.pdf>.
- Devkota, M. & Neupane, N., 2025, 'Influence of English on local languages: Perspectives from key stakeholders', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research and Innovation* 3(1), 145–157.
- Dick, A., 2024, *Why should children learn in their mother tongue?*, viewed 14 June 2025, from <https://saveourseas.com/sosf-shark-education-centre/why-children-should-learn-their-mother-tongue/>.
- Feza, N.N., 2016, 'Basic numeracy abilities of Xhosa reception year students in South Africa: Language policy issues', *Issues in Education Research* 26(4), 1–10.
- Hugo, A., 2020, 'Using research to enable teachers in the foundation phase to understand why their learners could struggle to develop home language abilities', *Journal for Language Teaching* 54(1), 285–303. <https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v54i1.9>
- Hugo, A.J. & Masalesa, M.J., 2021, 'Realising that the out-of-school environment could influence the development of foundation phase learners' literacy skills', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 11(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v11i1.840>
- Igarashi, T., Maulana, S. & Suryadarna, D., 2024, 'Mother tongue-based education in a diverse society and the acquisition of foundational skills: Evidence from the Philippines', *Labour Economics* 91, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2024.102641>
- Iwuanyamwu, P.N., 2023, 'Preparing teachers for culturally responsive education', *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 22(1), 1–13.
- Kangira, J., 2016, 'Challenges of the implementation of language policies in southern Africa: What is the way forward?', *Inkanyiso Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 8(2), 156–161.
- Khanyile, S. & Awung, F., 2023, 'Challenges on mother tongue education in isiZulu: A case study of selected schools in uThungula District of KwaZulu-Natal', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 5(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v5i1.1069>
- Kioko, A., 2015, *Why schools should teach young learners in home language?*, viewed 13 June 2025, from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/why-schools-should-teach-young-learners-ho>.
- Luo, A., 2023, *Content analysis: Guide, methods and examples*, viewed 13 June 2025, from <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/content-analysis/>.
- Mabela, M.L. & Ditsele, T., 2024, 'Exploring intellectualization of South African languages for academic purposes', *Literator* 45(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v45i1.1980>
- Mabese, M.L., 2017, 'A socially inclusive teaching strategy for transforming the teaching of English first additional language', *Perspectives in Education* 35(2), 16–29. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v35i2.2>
- Magwa, W., 2015, 'Attitudes towards the use of indigenous African languages as languages of instruction in education: A case of Zimbabwe', *Journal of Educational Policy and Entrepreneurial Research* 2(1), 1–16.
- Maharajh, L.R. & Chilli, B., 2024, 'English as an alien language: Teachers' experiences of the English across the curriculum strategy in South Africa', *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal* 12(2), 3603–3621. <https://doi.org/10.20533/licej.2040.2589.2021.0476>
- Malindi, Z., Ndebele, C. & Gobingca, B.Z., 2023, 'Examining teachers' views on the adoption of mother tongue-based bilingual education in mathematics and learning: A South African context', *South African Journal of Education* 43(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v43ns2a2242>
- Mashegoane, P., 2017, 'Fallacy of teaching Maths and Science in mother tongue', *HuffPost*, viewed 15 June 2025, from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fallacy-of-teaching-maths_b_11865318.
- Mashiya, N., 2011, 'IsiZulu and English in KwaZulu-Natal rural schools: How teachers fear failure and opt for English', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 1(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v1i1.71>
- McCombes, S., 2023, *Descriptive research/definition, types, methods & examples*, viewed 16 July 2025, from <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/descriptive-research-researchd/>.
- Mphahlele, R.S., Munyaka, M.M. & Moshaba, P.O.N. 2022, 'Challenges in using African language as the language of learning and teaching for Mathematics in rural schools: Foundation Phase teachers' perspectives', *Journal of Mathematics Education at Teachers College* 13(2), 19–27.
- Mudau, A.T., 2019, 'The choice of English as a language of learning and teaching in selected public primary schools of Vhembe District', Master's dissertation, University of Venda, Limpopo province.
- Mularshih, P., Satyarini, E. & Faisal, S., 2024, 'Using mother tongue in EFL classrooms: Pros and cons', *Khazanah Pendidikan* 18(2), 467–473. <https://doi.org/10.30595/jkp.v18i2.25710>
- Munyai, A. & Phooko, M.R., 2021, 'Is English becoming a threat to the existence of indigenous languages in institutions of higher learning in South Africa?', *De Jure Law Journal*, viewed 07 October 2025, from <https://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/dejure/v54ni/18>.
- Mutongoza, B.H., Mutanho, C., Linake, M.A. & Makeleni, S., 2023, 'Reflections on decolonising instruction at South African universities', *Research in Educational Policy and Management* 5(2), 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.11>

- Negash, N., 2011, 'English language in Africa: An impediment or a contributor to development?', *Perceptions of English* 2(4), 2–24.
- Nishanthi, R., 2020, 'Understanding the importance of mother tongue learning', *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development* 5(1), 77–80.
- Ntombela, B.X.S., 2024, 'The hegemony of the English language and the plight of African languages: Towards linguistic revolution', *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning Journal* 1(8), 184–195.
- Nyoni, P., 2023, 'The politics of decolonising the curriculum through adopting mother tongue instruction in a South African historically disadvantaged university setting', *Curricular Perspectives* 43(1), 547–557. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-023-00210-1>
- Oranga, J. & Matere, A., 2023, 'Qualitative research: Essence, types and advantages', *Open Access Library Journal* 10(12), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111001>
- Pantic, N. & Florian, L., 2015, 'Developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice', *Education Inquiry* 6(3), 333–351. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.27311>
- Phiri, M., Chanda, C.T. & Mwanapabu, N.H., 2024, 'The effect of using local languages as a medium of instruction on academic performance of learners: A case of selected primary schools in Solwezi District of Northern-Western Province, Zambia', *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanities and Social Sciences* 11(3), 9–26.
- Pinnock, H., 2008, *Mother tongue based multilingual education: How can we move ahead?*, viewed 16 July 2025, from https://www.seameo.org/_Id2008/documents/Presentation_document/_Helen_Pinnock_mle_how_do_we_move_ahead.pdf.
- Quan, G.M., Fambasayi, R. & Ferreira, T., 2024, 'Special focus: Promoting access to basic education through the law in sub-Saharan Africa', *African Human Rights Law Journal* 24(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2024/v24n1a12>
- Quattara, C.A., Tang, Y., Luo, S., Diallo, B.S., Okagbue, E.F. & Loum, O.J.A., 2025, 'Mother-tongue mediated teaching and learning in primary education in Mali: Exploring the policy-action maze through a translanguaging pedagogy perspective', *International Multilingual Research Journal* 16(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2025.2495438>
- Raton, J.R.H., Bagares, R.C.A. & Soberano, C.G., 2024, 'Teaching for social justice in English language classrooms: A qualitative analysis of pedagogical designs', *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics* 9(2), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.21462/jeltl.v9i2.1305>
- Stoop, C., 2017, 'Children's rights to mother-tongue education in a multilingual world: A comparative analysis between South Africa and Germany', *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 20, 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1727-3781/2017/v20i0a820>
- Sun, L., 2025, 'Integrating culturally sustaining pedagogies with social justice language education: Insights from a field-based education course', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, viewed 07 October 2025, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12807>.