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LANGUAGE DYNAMICS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN RURAL XITSONGA-SPEAKING GRADE 10 HISTORY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) on the academic success of Xitsonga-speaking Grade 10 students in rural History classrooms in four Mopani district's quintile 1 schools in Limpopo Province. Quintile 1 schools are those considered by the government of South Africa as being in poor communities that cannot afford to pay for their children's education. Utilising a mixed methods approach, the investigation involved four classroom observations, 4 teacher interviews, and four focus group discussions with learners alongside the Solomon Four quasi-experiment for quantitative data collection using the four classrooms. The classes were used as intact groups of n=20, with a total of 80 learners. The results indicate a negative correlation between the learners' academic performance and their proficiency in LoLT. Furthermore, this study reveals that a disconnect between the learners' first language used at home and the English language of instruction contributes to educational challenges. It was observed that when teachers employed the learners' first language, the educational outcomes improved significantly, underscoring the effectiveness of using learners' native language in the learning process. The study suggests that integrating translanguaging into the multilingual educational system can align with linguistic realities and foster superior academic results. The findings advocate for education stakeholders to recognise and utilise translanguaging to make the curriculum more accessible and engaging, thus improving academic achievements in Xitsonga-dominant classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

The interplay between instruction language and academic achievement has long captivated the scholarly community globally. Academic performance reflects the degree to which students have realised their educational objectives within a specified timeframe, as evaluated through formal assessments (Narad & Abdullah, 2016). In developing nations like South Africa, students often face the challenge of being assessed in a language that diverges from their native tongue (Bunyi, 1999; Hameso, 1997).

In the African educational context, particularly within the former colonial countries, English and French emerged as the more dominant languages of education (Ingse, Skattum. Brock-Utne, 2009). The genesis of the historical imposition of non-native languages for learning and teaching (LoLT) has its roots in the scramble for Africa, where the introduction of language policies by missionaries entrenched the educational use of foreign languages, thereby perpetuating Western cultural hegemony post-colonialism (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2020). After colonisation, African nations inherited the colonial languages, which now serve as formal languages for education and commerce (Hameso, 1997). In South Africa, the

predominant language was Afrikaans, which English subsequently replaced due to several shifts in domestic political dynamics.

With the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa introduced a new constitution that enshrined the right to basic education for all children, as encapsulated within the Bill of Rights (Asmal & Sachs, 1996). The language in education policy, another policy introduced after democracy, posits that the selection of LoLT is contingent upon individual choice, provided the language is official. This legislative act empowered school governing bodies representing parental interests to determine their preferred LoLT for new schools (South Africa, 1998). It is commonplace in South African public schools for learners in grades 1 to 3 to be educated in their home language, with English taught as a subject. However, from grade 4 onwards, English typically becomes the LoLT, notwithstanding the linguistic hurdles it presents for learners (Evans & Nthulana, 2018a). The policy further permits schools to offer up to three languages (South Africa, 1998).

The accessibility to English language resources significantly differs between learners in rural provinces and their urban counterparts, with the latter generally having greater exposure (Evans & Nthulana, 2018b). In urban schools, learners may employ a language at home different from the school's language, often resulting in higher English proficiency as if it were their first language (L1). Conversely, rural learners are predominantly immersed in their L1 and encounter English only within the educational setting, both as a subject and as LoLT. Consequently, rural learners typically converse in their L1, signifying that they are bilingual or multilingual within a primarily monolingual educational framework. Bilingualism denotes varying proficiencies in two languages and can extend to educational contexts where minority languages are used in teaching (Garcia & Lin, 2017).

The differential exposure to LoLT and L1 between rural and urban learners, due to resource limitations in rural communities and the background of rural learners, results in restricted exposure to LoLT and subsequent difficulties in content comprehension. This scenario necessitates teachers to utilise both L1 and LoLT in the educational process (Charamba & Zano, 2019a; Kerfoot, 2022; Nsele et al., 2022)

This paper addresses three research questions: How does English as a Second Language (ESL) and LoLT impact learner academic performance in Xitsonga's dominant Grade 10 History classrooms in rural public schools? What is the nature of language use amongst Xitsonga-speaking Grade 10 History learners and their teachers in the classroom? And, what role does the learners' rural environment play in Grade 10 History academic performance where English is used as LoLT? Hence, the literature examined in this article delves into the various elements that impact a learner's academic performance, particularly emphasising the significance of the second language (L2) as a Language of learning and teaching, History education and translingual practices. The research findings reveal several noteworthy trends, such as the correlation between bilingualism and academic performance in History and challenges stemming from subpar language proficiency. These trends will be further explored and elaborated upon in the ensuing section.

Bilingual Education and Academic Performance

Bilingualism in education refers to using two languages for learning and assessment, aiming for bilingual proficiency, especially in teaching minority languages (Köktürk et al., 2016). Bilingualism is the mastery of two languages acquired during upbringing, a view supported by (Baker & Wright, 2017). Hence, proficiency in one or more languages is central to academic success issues. Cummins (1979)defines this phenomenon as a threshold hypothesis. Cummins hypothesises that some conditions must be met for bilingualism to work for academic success. He purports that a learner must have high competency in one of the languages or high competency in both languages at the same level. He further states academic challenges ensue when a learner has below-average competency in both languages.

Language proficiency is a significant concern impacting academic performance among learners. Studies indicate that students using a language other than their first language (L1) as the (LoLT) often face challenges due to insufficient proficiency in the LoLT. In South Africa, where there are 12 official languages, the Language in Education Policy allows any official language to be used as the LoLT based on resource availability (South Africa., 1998). However, the predominant use of English as the LoLT in public schools poses difficulties, especially for learners whose first language is different.

Rural learners, in particular, face disadvantages as they have limited exposure to English, leading to poor language proficiency and academic outcomes (Evans & Nthulana, 2018b). Research supports that learners performing better typically learn in their L1 than those using a second language. Additionally, situations where teachers and learners struggle with English proficiency further compound these challenges, impacting teaching effectiveness (Molteno, 2017; Salie et al., 2020).

Second language (ESL) speaking learners often rely on their L1 in their communities, limiting exposure to the LoLT. This minimal exposure to English has been strongly linked to academic performance issues across educational levels (Prinsloo et al., 2018). Poor language proficiency is a persistent challenge that affects learning outcomes, and this is evident from primary school to university (Ndawo, 2019). Across South Africa and broader African contexts, the language of instruction significantly influences academic performance (Makondo, 2018). Learners utilising a second language as the LoLT encounter barriers in various subjects, struggling due to inadequate academic language proficiency (Nyoni et al., 2019). Attempts to mitigate these challenges, such as through code-switching and translation by teachers, often fall short as assessment in the L2 remains a hurdle for learners, impacting their performance negatively (Dube & Gumbo, 2020).

Moreover, studies highlight that learners and teachers face language proficiency challenges that contribute to the observed academic struggles. This emphasises the critical role of language proficiency in educational settings and the need for comprehensive strategies to address these issues effectively (Tanga et al., 2019).

Issues in History Education

History is valued in education for fostering social and moral values, shaping political and cultural understanding and character development (Goh, 1989a). Exploring identities and societal knowledge enhances citizenship awareness, patriotism, and multicultural understanding (Dube, 2018). The decline in history's presence in schools is attributed to distorted curricula, teaching methods, and prioritization issues (Black, 2014a). Funding bodies favouring science and business studies over history impact students, especially in South Africa (Davids, 2016a; Ssentanda et al., 2020). The contentious nature of history further complicates teaching and learning (Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018).

While the number of learners taking history slightly increases, the subject remains less popular due to misconceptions about its value and difficulty (Eeden, 2012). Efforts to reintroduce history as a compulsory subject in South Africa have been proposed by the Ministerial Task Team (MTT) (Davids, 2016b) and is supported by teachers (Naicker, 2020) despite challenges in teaching methodology and language barriers (Dube, 2018). Language barriers in history education affect performance, with educators using L1 to aid learning (Nsele et al., 2022b). Challenges in comprehension due to language issues persist across subjects, impacting assessments and learning outcomes (Mavuru & Ramnarain, 2020). The Department of Basic Education notes the concerns about learners' struggles in history exams, particularly in higher-order thinking and essay writing, indicating a need for improved proficiency (Department of Basic Education, 2023). Addressing language barriers and enhancing teaching methodologies are vital for improving history education outcomes.

Table 1
Overall Achievement Rates in History

Year	No. wrote.	No. achieved at 30% and above	% achieved at 30% and above	No. achieved at 40% and above 121	% achieved at 40% and above
2019	164 729	148 271	90,0	121 936	74,0
2020	173 498	159 737	92,1	134 610	77,6
2021	227 448	203 473	89,5	166 576	73,2
2022	237 327	209 315	88,2	165 483	69,7
2023	225 731	198 052	87,7	154 501	68,4

The discipline of History is deemed vital for imparting cultural knowledge and fostering respect for one's heritage (Goh, 1989b). After implementing Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in 1997, there has been a declining engagement with history as a subject. Language proficiency confers an advantage for learners studying history, given the subject's requirement for essay and paragraph writing during assessments, indicating the need for specialised knowledge (M. C. Dube, 2018). Consequently, the declining number of history learners potentially presages a decrease in educators possessing the requisite subject expertise.

Preliminary studies have indicated that some adults, including educators, have negative perceptions towards history, influenced by a belief that it served as a vehicle for insidious indoctrination by certain community segments. Nonetheless, these studies have also revealed a more optimistic attitude among learners, suggesting that the subject's future may not be entirely dim (Black, 2014b). The Mopani district's examination registration data exemplifies the dwindling interest in history, where merely 13 out of 35 quintile 1 schools within predominantly Xitsonga-speaking communities offered history (Limpopo Department of Basic Education, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

Context of the Study and Sampling

The study was conducted in the rural setting of the greater Giyani municipality, a Category B municipality within the Mopani District of Limpopo Province. A Category B municipality falls under another municipality and does not operate independently. Giyani is approximately 185km from Polokwane, the capital of Limpopo Province, 100 km from Thohoyandou, and 550 km from Pretoria, with its eastern boundary adjoining the Kruger National Park. The municipality comprises 10 traditional authority areas with 91 villages around Giyani, the municipal headquarters.

The Mopani District houses 228 quintile one schools dispersed across the neighbouring villages (Limpopo Department of Basic Education, 2024), with the research focusing on four specific schools located around Greater Giyani Municipality in Xitsonga-speaking communities. Although some villages predominantly speak northern Sepedi (KheLobedu dialect), this study particularly targets quintile one schools within Xitsonga-speaking areas known for their high poverty rates, as the Department of Education (Education, 2014) recognised. Moreover, English is notable as the second language and medium of instruction in public schools within this region.

Purposeful sampling is a method that Creswell (2014) advocates and elaborates on by Asiamah, Mensah and Otend-abayie. (2022) was utilised to select participants with a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon. This approach is crucial for exploring social issues intricately. It involves selecting four schools meeting specific criteria: offering History, located in rural areas, within quintile one schools, and primarily inhabited by Xitsonga-speaking communities.

Grade 10 history learners from these schools were purposefully chosen for their engagement with the subject, while their educators were conveniently selected based on

availability, following convenient sampling guidelines (Asiamah et al., 2022). These history teachers, key to the study, were chosen for their willingness to participate, daily historical interactions with learners, and ability to explain the rural environment's impact on Grade 10 History performance, taught in English as LoLT. Notably, these educators, who also participated in the classroom observations, shared a unique bond and familiarity with the students under study. Purposive sampling is uncommon in mixed-methods research. However, it was most suitable for the study reported in this paper because it also allowed using the selected classes as intact groups for the quasi-experiment. Much is elaborated below on the Solomon-four quasi-experiment.

Data Collection

This study utilised mixed-methods research with a sequential exploratory design to investigate language dynamics and their role in the academic achievement of Xitsonga-speaking Grade 10 history learners. Qualitative data collection methods included classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews. These methods addressed the research questions on the nature of language use in the Xitsonga and English bilingual classrooms. It also addressed the research question on the role of rurality in using English and Xitsonga for teaching and learning in a History classroom. The quantitative methods were used to analyse test scores of translingual activities in a history classroom.

The initial stage of data collection employed non-participant observation, where the researchers observed without actively engaging in the activities (Kothari, 2004a; Kumar, 2011). The observations addressed the research question: What is the nature of language use amongst Xitsonga-speaking Grade 10 History learners and their teachers in the classroom? This method offered insights into Grade 10 Xitsonga-speaking learners' interactions with teachers in the History classroom, conducted over five days at each of the four schools. Observations were made during 1-hour sessions each day, divided into three segments: an initial 10 minutes, a 40-minute main lesson, and a final 10 minutes, totalling 60 minutes per session and 20 hours across all schools. The researcher, positioned inconspicuously, used a semi-structured observation sheet to guide data collection without disrupting the participants.

Interviews constituted a pivotal data collection method within this study's framework. This approach traditionally involves the presentation of oral-verbal stimuli to elicit verbal responses (Kothari, 2004b) and is commonly utilised to delve into participants' narratives and contexts (Jameel et al., 2018). Hence, semi-structured interviews were orchestrated with History teachers to obtain a profound comprehension of their instructional encounters within the ESL monolingual educational setting. The semi-structured interview questionnaire blended standardised inquiries with probing questions, aligning with Jameel et al. (2018)'s guide. This methodology aimed to foster open-ended dialogues guided by the researcher's classroom observations and the teachers' responses to the predetermined inquiries. The interview questions were crafted to unravel insights regarding the impact of learners' rural environment on Grade 10 History academic achievements in the English Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) environment. to delineate the linguistic dynamics between Xitsonga-speaking instructors and their pupils in the History instructional domain.

Moreover, the History teachers completed a demographic survey, delineating their professional background and teaching experience within public school settings. This data-gathering technique was strategically chosen to afford the researcher profound insights into the participants' educational environments and experiential contexts. Focus group discussions, a data collection method, involved exploring participants' opinions through open dialogue (Kumar, 2011). Discussions were held for three days per group to deepen the exploration of the impact of the rural environment on history academic performance using English as LoLT. Initial questions on History interest aimed to foster participant comfort and openness, a strategic

choice for uncovering insights potentially missed in individual interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The Solomon four-group design enhances internal and external validity while minimising the impact of confounding variables. Notably, it eliminates pre-test sensitisation. The design specifically focused on addressing the research question: How does English as the Second Language (ESL) and LoLT impact learner academic performance in Xitsonga's dominant Grade 10 History classrooms in rural public schools?

This study randomly assigned four intact classes as groups A, B, C, or D, each treated as a distinct entity. Groups A and B underwent both pre-test and post-test assessments. This method eliminated the weaknesses of a simple quasi-experiment, where it is hard to account for the carry-over effect from pre-tests. Group D, in this regard, which does not receive the pretest or participate in the intervention, serves as the ultimate indicator of the carryover effect. The pretest and the post-test included translingual assessment activities where English and Xitsonga were used as input or output, and vice versa. The intervention also included teaching and learning in Xitsonga and English as input and output languages, and vice versa.

Data Analysis

The initial phase of the data analysis process involved the collection of observation sheets used for conducting semi-structured observations in history classes across selected schools. Noteworthy elements scrutinised included language usage and the dynamics of interactions between students and teachers within the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) framework during the History sessions. Subsequently, a meticulous organisation and review of these observation sheets were carried out. Recurring patterns and concepts within the data were identified through a methodical coding process, elucidating predominant themes. The analytical framework adopted was the inductive thematic approach, facilitating the transition from specific observations to broader conceptualisations and eventual theoretical insights.

Within this inductive thematic analysis, themes emerged from investigating interactions between Xitsonga-speaking teachers and learners in a rural school where English was the designated Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) during history lessons. Teachers in each classroom were anonymised as Teachers A, B, C, and D, aligning with the pseudonyms assigned to the schools for confidentiality purposes. Subsequently, the next dataset under scrutiny comprised responses from interviews conducted with the four History teachers from the respective schools who had previously participated in the classroom observations. These responses were transcribed, organised, cleaned, and coded. Following the naming convention established in the observations, the teachers were identified as A, B, C, and D. Similarly, data from focus group discussions underwent thematic analysis after being thoroughly cleaned and coded. Lastly, the quantitative data obtained through the Solomon four-group experiment was analysed. Before this analysis, pre-and post-tests from the history classes in the four schools were administered, marked, and recorded. IBM SPSS software was used to analyse the test scores.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Regarding the research question on the use of language between teachers and learners in the classroom, a consistent pattern emerged across Grade 10 History classrooms during the observation. Initially, the teachers employed English for greetings, providing basic instructions on the lesson's structure. Teachers A and B consistently used English for greetings, while Teacher C greeted learners in English but occasionally conversed in Xitsonga, particularly when learners presented issues in Xitsonga. Teacher D alternated between Xitsonga and English for greetings. However, instructions were consistently given in English. Furthermore, the integration of both Xitsonga and English for discussions was observed. Teachers frequently

transitioned to Xitsonga to elucidate concepts, leading to discussions where learners actively participated, often responding in Xitsonga. Learners exhibited a preference for and proficiency in their home language, contributing to more interactive classroom dynamics and deeper comprehension of topics discussed. For example, in school C, the Teacher said:

"*Marie Antoinette was the downfall of King Lois because she loved expensive things even though the country did not have money".*

Then she changed the changed the language and said :

"*Mary Antoinette hi yena anga onhela King Lois hi ku a rhandza swilo swa ku durha kuve tiko a ringa ri na mali*".

It was observable that teachers and learners were not concerned about strictly using English as a language of teaching and learning. They were concerned about communicating clearly and deepening understanding and engagement. This is visible when the teacher in school C repeated key statements in Xitsonga as if she knew learners would like to engage with her, provided she spoke to them in a language they most understood.

A poignant challenge marks the educational landscape as educators face the impact of learners' struggles with academic performance. A notable hindrance arises from learners grappling with English proficiency, particularly since these learners have an L1, thereby impeding their learning and assessment processes. This issue has culminated in a phenomenon where certain students opt to evade the study of History, as eloquently articulated by Learner 5B, who said:

"Many people are afraid of History because they are afraid of writing essays. Many people are also afraid of English."

It is visible that discussions among learners regarding choosing school subjects reflect fears when the language of learning and teaching is considered. Learner 5B's reflection above shows that History as a subject requires adequate knowledge of English, a language through which it is taught, for academic success. Hence, any learner who perceives themselves as inadequate in the English language will shy away from choosing History as a school subject.

Discussion

Translingual approach to learning

The Language in Education Policy permits South African schools to choose their LoLT (South African Government, 1996). However, English is widely favoured due to its economic significance, global utility, and relevance for tertiary education and the workplace. Translanguaging for emphasis and clarification was evident post-greetings. While teachers primarily taught in English, they switched to Xitsonga to elaborate complex concepts, sparking increased learner engagement. Learners demonstrated heightened interest and participation when concepts were explained in Xitsonga, indicating improved comprehension and a livelier classroom atmosphere. The use of translanguaging to aid understanding aligns with previous research advocating for enhanced learning outcomes in familiar languages (Maluleke et al., 2020; Nsele et al., 2022a).

In instances where the Teacher switched to Xitsonga, the discussions became lively, which is in line with the findings made by (Charamba & Zano, 2019b), which highlights the advantages of using the L1 during learning. The observations in Grade 10 History classes reveal a nuanced approach to language use, showcasing the benefits of incorporating both English and

Xitsonga in teaching practices. While English remains predominant for instructions, the strategic use of Xitsonga for elaboration and discussions significantly enhances student engagement, comprehension, and overall classroom dynamics. This translanguaging approach aligns with research advocating for improved learning outcomes when utilising familiar languages (Nsele et al., 2022a). The dynamic integration of both languages fosters a more interactive and enriched educational environment, ultimately contributing to more effective teaching and enhanced student participation.

Language proficiency

Scholarly investigations by (P. Dube & Gumbo, 2020) have shed light on the intricate interplay between English language proficiency and students' academic achievements. These research findings echo the conclusions drawn by (Kithinji & Ohirsi, 2022), underscoring Teacher 2's assertion at School B regarding the pivotal role of language mastery in comprehending academic content effectively. When they said: "*Mastery of language is key to mastery of content because isn't it that History is.. is taught and learned in English so learners whose language skills are poor, are obviously going to fail to understand as the lesson progress,"* Consequently, a nexus is established between language proficiency and academic success, particularly accentuating the indispensability of English fluency in disciplines such as History.

Moreover, the limited exposure to English within learners' domestic environments poses a significant barrier to their academic advancements, accentuating the discernible disparity between the linguistic environment at school and that within their homes. This discrepancy underscores the imperative for bridging the gap between school-based language instruction and the linguistic dynamics prevalent in students' familial contexts.

During the discussion, most learners expressed the desire to take law and related career choices as the reasons that influenced their decision to choose History; however, they also pointed out the disadvantage they faced with their poor language proficiency while also acknowledging the need to use English as LoLT. For example, learner 5D said: *I feel good when we're doing history in English, also when we are grown up we will be able to experience things, we will be able to communicate in English. like when we're doing history and when we grow up to become lawyers and when we move around defending people, English will be the language of communication".*

The academic realm grapples with a significant challenge as educators navigate the impact of language proficiency and its impact on students' academic performance. The struggle to master English, particularly in the presence of learners' L1, poses a formidable obstacle to effective learning and assessment processes. Leading to the reluctance of some students to take History due to concerns over their ability to write essays. English language proficiency underscores the intricate relationship between bilingualism and academic success.

Research by Dube and Gumbo (2020), Kithinji and Ohirsi, (2022) emphasises the pivotal role of language mastery in academic success, as highlighted by educators like Teacher 2. The students' aspirations for legal careers, despite acknowledging language barriers, underscore the importance of English as the language of instruction. Addressing the disparity between school-based language education and students' linguistic backgrounds is crucial to enhancing academic progress and preparing learners for future challenges. The interconnectedness of language proficiency, educational goals, and career choices underscores the significance of bilingualism in achieving academic excellence, particularly in subjects such as History.

The academic landscape faces a critical challenge concerning the impact of language proficiency on students' educational performance. The struggle to master English, alongside learners' native languages, significantly influences learning outcomes and assessment processes. This dilemma is evident in students' reluctance to engage with subjects like History due to concerns about writing essays and English proficiency.

Bilingualism and academic performance in the History subject

Studies also showed that teachers' and learners' perceptions of English being used in the school solely for academic purposes led to a disconnect in language use. The data collected showed that Learners predominantly communicate in their home language which is Xitsonga, hindering English proficiency and academic performance. Teachers emphasise the importance of a conducive home environment for continuous learning. Learners also highlighted the disadvantages they had due to language differences between school and home which creates Limited exposure to English affects proficiency, impacting academic achievement. For example, Teacher B stated:

"Learning is not only when they are at school B only, even when they're at home, the environment at home has to be mmm, conducive in such a way that it enhances mmm.. the teaching and learning which happens in the classroom, so*, when a learner is exposed to things at home, fetching firewood in Shangaan, plastering the floor in Shangaan, being sent to catch the locusts, in that way, going to initiation schools in Shangaan, even going to traditional parties in Shangaan, doing everything in vernacular. So that in itself impedes learners in the progress towards the achievement… of achieving the expected skills at school because there's no continuation of what is happening… The home environment does not continue the learners' experiences at school you see now; it discontinues".*

The narrative underscores a significant discord within the educational landscape of rural learners. The divergence between the linguistic environment of schools, predominantly English, and that of the learners' homes, primarily Xitsonga, poses a challenge to sustained academic progress. The teacher's elucidation of the linguistic dissonance between these environments accentuates a palpable disconnect in language usage. Moreover, insights gleaned from interviews with the learners shed light on the discordance in language application within the school setting. The learners articulated the inherent setbacks arising from the linguistic duality prevalent in their learning environment and home context, delineating a poignant narrative of estrangement when transitioning between linguistic spheres. Notably, observations on the learners' utilisation of the English language underscored a nuanced pattern characterised by intermittent deployment rather than consistent usage.

For example, Learner 3A stated."We do sometimes speak in Xitsonga in class." Another learner from school B lamented their poor English language acquisition by saying in her L1:
"loko va tswari va hina, Loko a hi tshama na vatswari lava kotaku ku vulavula Xilungu,na loko hi ri xikolweni a hi ta kota ku vulavula Xilungu and a hi ta kota ku dyondza kahle". Which can be loosely translated into English: *"Maybe if our parents. If we stayed with parents who could speak English at home, we would also speak English at school, and we would be able to learn better."*

The narratives of learners 3A and 5B underscore a prevailing perception among students that English primarily serves as a tool for academic purposes, thereby restricting its application to learning contexts. Consequently, these individuals resort predominantly to their native Xitsonga language for interpersonal communication within school premises and familial interactions at home. This linguistic preference for Xitsonga impedes the sustained utilisation of English, thus impeding the enhancement of their English language proficiency. These linguistic dynamics place these learners in a disadvantaged position, adversely influencing their academic achievements, particularly given that English operates as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) within their educational framework.

Prior studies, such as (Raft, 2017) have underscored the detrimental impact of limited exposure to the English language on academic performance among learners. This is in line with the findings made in (Chall & Jacobs, 1983). The prevailing use of Xitsonga, a predominant home language, both in educational institutions and domestic settings, creates a linguistic barrier. accentuating disparities encountered post-schooling. The restricted communication scope to the

learner's native language within their social circles compounds the challenge as learners grapple with inadequate English language proficiency, a critical requirement for academic success, as noted by (Ssentanda et al., 2020). This deficiency is particularly pronounced in subjects like History, where essay composition necessitates a nuanced grasp of English language conventions, compounding the academic hurdles faced by learners (Kadodo & Muzira, no date).

The findings in this study further show that the learners and teachers use L1, which is Xitsonga, during, particularly for effective discussion. These findings are in line with those made by literature, which showed that in cases where L1 was used, learners were able to participate actively. The results of this study suggest that both students and educators capitalise on their common language, which is Xitsonga, to facilitate effective discussions during the learning process. These findings align with prior literature, which illustrates that learners' active involvement is promoted when their first language is employed. This phenomenon is often attributed to the cognitive and affective benefits of using a familiar language, which can enhance comprehension, retention, and the overall engagement of students (Cummins, 2000) Furthermore, the use of the first language in educational settings has been shown to foster a sense of cultural identity and belonging, which can further motivate students to participate actively in their learning (Norton, 1997).

The study's findings also contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of multilingualism in education. In multilingual societies, such as those found in many African countries, including South Africa, the integration of local languages into the curriculum can serve as a bridge between student's home and school environments, resulting in a more inclusive and equitable education system (Heugh, 2000). This is in line with the principles of linguistic human rights.

The findings of this study further underscore the significance of utilising students' first language, such as their Xitsonga L1, in educational discussions. This practice not only supports academic achievement but also reinforces cultural identity and promotes a more inclusive educational environment where learners become active participants in their own learning.

Findings from Quantitative Data

The quantitative data obtained from the Solomon four-group experimental design was systematically analyzed using IBM SPSS statistical software to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. A central aspect of the analysis involved applying Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, which assesses whether the variance across groups is statistically equivalent. This step was crucial in verifying the assumptions of parametric testing before drawing comparisons. Using a significance threshold set at 0.05, as recommended by Mills and Gay (2015), the study explored post-test performance variations among learners from different schools, each exposed to differing combinations of language input and output. The primary focus was on assessing whether the use of Xitsonga—students' common or home language—as the language of content input, followed by output in their standard instructional language, had a significant impact on their academic achievement in History. The results, as summarized in the accompanying table, revealed meaningful differences, highlighting the influence of language in shaping learners' comprehension and performance outcomes.

Table 2
Determining the Statistically Significant Difference between Groups

Group B Eng input Xitsonga output and A Xits input-Eng output	N	Mean	Std deviation	Std error mean
Scores for group A Eng input	20	43,6350	16,24371	3,63220
Scores for group B Xits input	20	43,8650	15,82318	3,53817

Table 3
Results of Independent T-Test Analysys

	f	sig	t	df	Mean difference	Std error difference	95% confidence of the difference	
							Lower	Upper
Scores for group B Eng input equal variances assumed	,006	,938	-.045	38	-,23000	5,07066	-10,4950	10,05301
Scores for group A Xits input equal variances not assumed			-.045	37,9	-,23000	5,07066	10,49524	10,05324

To explore the potential influence of language input and output on learner performance, an independent samples t-test was conducted comparing the scores of two distinct groups of students. Group A received instruction in English and was assessed using Xitsonga as the output language, while Group B was instructed in Xitsonga but completed assessments in English. Both groups underwent a pre-test to establish baseline performance levels, with only Group A receiving a targeted intervention prior to the post-test. Despite this intervention, the statistical output revealed a calculated t-value of -0.045 with 38 degrees of freedom and a corresponding p-value of 0.964. Since this p-value is substantially higher than the standard alpha level of 0.05, it indicates a lack of statistically significant difference between the average performance scores of the two groups.

In practical terms, these results uphold the null hypothesis, which posits that there is no meaningful difference between the two group means. This suggests that the variation in language input and output—whether the instruction or assessment occurred in English or Xitsonga—did not significantly influence the learners' academic performance. One interpretation of this outcome is that the learners' bilingual capabilities enable them to adapt effectively, regardless of which language is used during instruction or evaluation. Their ability to switch between languages may provide cognitive flexibility and reinforce understanding, especially in contexts where both languages are familiar.

Supporting this interpretation, prior research emphasizes the educational benefits of bilingual or multilingual assessment approaches. For example, Almusharraf (2021) argues that integrating more than one language in instructional and evaluative contexts enhances comprehension and performance. Similarly, Al-Ahdal (2020) highlights that exclusive use of an additional language—especially when students are not yet proficient—can place learners at a disadvantage. By incorporating both the home language and the language of instruction, assessments can become more inclusive and reflective of learners' true capabilities. Therefore, these findings reinforce the pedagogical value of bilingual strategies, demonstrating that the use of two languages in assessment not only reduces linguistic barriers but also supports equitable learning outcomes for diverse student populations.

Table 4
Comparing the Post-Test Scores between Groups C (English input, Xitsonga output), and D (Xitsonga input, English output)

Group C Eng input-Xits output and D Xits input-English output	N	Mean	Std deviation	Std error mean
Scores for group C Eng input	20	8,9500	13,78204	3,08176
Scores for group D Xits input	20	19,0500	12,52566	2,80082

Table 5
Results of Independent Sample Test

	t	df	One sided p	Two-sided p	Mean difference	Std error difference	95% confidence of the difference	
							Lower	Upper
Scores for group C Eng input equal variances assumed	-2,42	38	,010	,020	-10,1000	4,16435	-18,5302	-1,6697
Scores for group D Xits input equal variances not assumed	-2,42	37,65	,010	,020	-10,1000	4,16435	-18,5328	-1,6671

We hypothesised that there should be a significant difference between Group C (English input—Xitsonga output) and Group D (Xitsonga input—English output), with the expectation that Group D would have significantly higher mean scores.The analysis was conducted using a t-test, with the assumption of equal variances. The calculated t-value is -2.425 with 38 degrees of freedom, resulting in a p-value of 0.020.

The p-value (0.020) is less than the chosen significance level (0.05). This means that the null hypothesis (which states that there is no significant difference between the groups) is rejected, not the alternative hypothesis as stated: that there should be a significant difference between Group C (English input—Xitsonga output) and Group D (Xitsonga input—English output), with the expectation that Group D would have significantly higher mean scores. there is sufficient evidence to support the alternative hypothesis, which posits a significant difference between the mean scores of groups C and D.

The findings show that Group D (Xitsonga input—English output) has a higher mean score than Group C (English input—Xitsonga output). This supports the hypothesis that learners perform better when they receive input in their home language (Xitsonga) than when they receive input in a second language (English). Consistency with Previous Research: The results align with previous studies by Nsele et al. (2022) and Charamba (2020, 2021), which found that using the learners' first language (L1) as the language of input can lead to better performance and deeper understanding of content.

Using L1 for Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The study investigated the impact of pre-testing and language input/output on the academic performance of learners by comparing the post-test scores of four groups. The research utilized t-tests to determine significant differences between the groups. The initial hypothesis posited that groups receiving a pre-test (A and B) would exhibit significantly higher mean scores than those without (C and D). This hypothesis was supported, as there was no significant difference between the scores of Groups A and B, indicating that the intervention did not significantly impact the results. This supports the notion that multilingual learning can enhance educational performance.

However, the hypothesis that Group D's mean score would be significantly higher than Group C's was not supported. The results showed a significant difference between the two groups, with Group D (Xitsonga input, English output) scoring higher than Group C (English input, Xitsonga output). This suggests that using the learner's first language (L1) as input can positively influence performance. The findings align with previous research emphasizing the importance of using learners' L1 in the classroom and the benefits of multilingual education in line with the findings which show that the use of learners experiencing multilingual learning

can perform better than those who are learning monolingually (Brown, 2021). Furthermore, Kerfoot (2022) argues that in instances where learners use all the languages in a classroom substantially, this improves educational performance which could further lay the basis for greater epistemic justice

The study recommends utilizing all linguistic repertoires in content subjects within a translanguaging framework, highlighting the positive impact of using the learner's dominant language as input. The study compared the post-test scores of groups A and B, which received a pre-test, to those of groups C and D, which did not. The results indicated that the pre-test had a significant impact on performance, but the intervention itself did not significantly alter the outcomes. Additionally, the study found that using Xitsonga as the input language (Group D) led to higher scores than using English as the input language (Group C), underscoring the importance of leveraging learners' L1 in educational settings. This suggests that the learner's use of L1 plays a positive role in the learner's performance. These findings are in line with those made by Charamba (2020) who highlighted a significant role played by students' L1 in a classroom. Earlier Studies by Mart (2017) also showed that when learners are assessed in their home language, they perform better than when they are assessed in a second language, in line with similar findings. Nsele et al (2022) further recommend the use of all linguistic repertoires for learning in content subjects within the constructs of translanguaging that the learner's dominant language should be used as a language of input as it was found to benefit the learners positively.

These findings have shown the positive role played by the learners' home language in their academic performance which is in line with literature from other scholars. In instances where learners wrote a test in their own Xitsonga language as their language of input, they performed better than when they used English input. this is shown in the comparison of groups A(Xitsonga input, English output and group B English input, Xitsonga output) as well as in the comparison of groups C (English input and group D (Xitsonga input). Hence, the learner's language of learning and teaching affects the learner's academic performance. These findings are in line with those made in previous research, which emphasised the positive influence of learners' home language on academic success and argued that employing a combination of languages during assessments can boost academic performance (Charamba & Zano, 2019; Charamba, 2021; Nsele, Maluleke and Govender, 2022).

The data collected were targeted at answering the questions related to Language Dynamics and Academic Achievement among Xitsonga-speaking Grade 10 History learners from rural areas, addressing the following questions. What is the nature of language use amongst Xitsonga learners and teachers in History classrooms? How does English Second Language (ESL) learning and teaching impact learner academic performance in Xitsonga dominant Grade 10 History classrooms in rural public schools?

To answer the question "What is the nature of language use amongst Xitsonga?" research conducted scrutinised the linguistic practices within the Xitsonga-speaking Student-Teacher dynamic.". Through the utilisation of qualitative data-gathering methods such as classroom observations, interviews with educators, and focus group dialogues with students, the investigation provided valuable insights. The results illuminated a clear link between insufficient linguistic abilities and academic underachievement. These conclusions substantiate previous scholarly works by (Omidire, 2019) who is further supported by (Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019) underscoring the pivotal role of language proficiency in shaping students' professional ambitions, particularly in disciplines like Law that demand a proficient command of the English language. The findings from the classroom observation showed that teachers use translanguaging during interaction in the English monolingual classroom, which is divided into two sub-themes: the use of translanguaging for emphasis and explanations and the use of a translanguaging approach to facilitate active participation.

The Use of Translanguaging for Emphasis and Explanations

During the instructional session, educators fostered learner engagement through the utilisation of bilingual questioning in both English and Xitsonga. Students were granted the flexibility to respond in either language, with instances of Xitsonga responses being subsequently translated by the instructor into English and transcribed on the board to aid in comprehension. This pedagogical approach not only enhanced the cognitive acquisitions of the learners but also bolstered their scholarly progression (Makondo, 2018; Omidire & Ayob, 2022).

Furthermore, data collected showed that translanguaging was employed to clarify difficult concepts. Moreover, the analysis further revealed a prevalent pattern where educators, when faced with the need to clarify complex ideas, initially delivered explanations in English before providing translations into Xitsonga. This method was widely practised, particularly in scenarios where students encountered challenges in grasping the subject matter.

The Use of Translanguaging Approach to Facilitate Active Participation

Throughout the instructional sessions, the educator alternated between English and Xitsonga to engage the students. Prompted by these bilingual prompts, the learners fluently responded in Xitsonga, prompting the teacher to translate and transcribe their contributions into English on the board for them to take notes. Noteworthy was the heightened enthusiasm displayed by the learners during Xitsonga conversations as opposed to those conducted in English. Over time, Xitsonga organically evolved into the primary medium of instruction owing to the shared Xitsonga L1 background of both educators and students, effectively establishing a linguistic common ground distinct from English. These observations underscore the inadvertent implementation of translingual pedagogy, albeit without a formalised framework dictating the conversational dynamics. As evidenced by (Tsagari & Giannikas, 2018). The deliberate incorporation of both languages can significantly bolster cognitive processes, fostering active interlanguage development among learners. Such outcomes echo the conclusions drawn, emphasising the inherent student engagement and receptivity when engaging with content in their native language during the educational process (Nsele et al., 2022a).

To answer the question, how does English Second Language (ESL) learning and teaching impact learner academic performance in Xitsonga-dominant Grade 10 History classrooms in rural public schools? The test scores from the pre-and post-tests conducted were analysed through IBM SPSS. The analysed data revealed that learners exhibited enhanced performance levels when exposed to instructional content in their first language (Xitsonga) while generating responses in their second language (English), as opposed to the scenario where English served as the input language with Xitsonga as the output language. This outcome implies that learners derive advantages from employing a more familiar language for input, culminating in cognitive advancements. These outcomes align with the scholarly investigations undertaken by (Kerfoot, 2022) underscoring the significance of incorporating all languages within a learner's repertoire within educational settings to amplify academic achievements and foster epistemic benefits.

CONCLUSION

The investigation into Language Dynamics and Academic Achievement among Xitsonga-speaking Grade 10 History learners from rural areas has yielded profound insights into the connection between language use and educational performance. The nature of language use amongst Xitsonga speakers, characterised by strategic deployment of translanguaging for emphasis, explanations, and active participation, has been shown to significantly enhance learner engagement and comprehension. This pedagogical approach, which honours the

linguistic resources of the learners, has been found to facilitate cognitive and academic development, particularly when the learners' first language is used as the primary medium for receiving information and English is used as the language of response. The empirical data, supported by pre and post-test analyses, corroborate the notion that academic performance is positively impacted when learners engage with content in their native language within a multilingual educational setting.

The implications of these findings are substantial. They suggest that multilingual education systems that incorporate translanguaging not only align with learners' linguistic realities but also promote better academic outcomes. This study advocates for educational stakeholders to acknowledge and harness the potential of translanguaging in rural, Xitsonga-dominant classrooms. By embracing this inclusive linguistic approach, educators can improve the academic achievement of learners by making the curriculum more accessible and engaging. To this end, the recommendations call for a concerted effort to support multilingual education, professional development for educators in translanguaging strategies, enhancement of language support programs, and informed policy development that recognises the impact of language use on educational success. Embracing these measures would represent a significant step toward acknowledging the linguistic diversity of learners and leveraging it to foster an equitable and effective educational environment.

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