

**A study of The advantages of teaching and learning in IsiZulu for early literacy  
development of mother-tongue speakers**

By

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## DECLARATION

**Student number: 61401560**

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Masters in African Languages at the University of South Africa. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other University.

Sign

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Date

November 2023

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research to my late mum, Ms. Thulisile Ndzimandze and Grandmother Gladys Mamane Khumalo who are no longer with us but will always have a special place in my heart and memory.

They created a lifelong passion for learning, tenacity, and the quest of knowledge in me. My scholastic trajectory has been guided by their unfailing support, selfless acts, and ceaseless encouragement.

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the benefits of using isiZulu as the language of instruction for young children in South Africa's Foundation Phase. The main objective was to understand how learning in their mother tongue enhances children's reading and writing skills. Research involved interviews with teachers, students, and parents, along with classroom observations. Findings revealed that children comprehend lessons more effectively when taught in isiZulu, leading to increased confidence and enthusiasm for learning. Although some parents worry that isiZulu instruction might limit future job opportunities, many recognize the value of strong early literacy skills in a familiar language. The study recommends that the Department of Basic Education expand support for mother-tongue instruction in early education and develop policies to promote its use.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

L1:	First Language
L2:	Second Language
FL:	Foreign Language
SL:	Second Language
EFL:	English Foreign Language
ESL:	English Second Language
LoLT:	Language of Teaching and Learning
PIRLS:	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

The present study seeks to highlight the advantages of teaching in the mother tongue in early literacy development. In both developed and developing countries, learners' low reading skills attainment remains problematic (Coltheart & Prior 2007). In South Africa, there is an ongoing concern surrounding the development of learners' literacy teaching and learning using the current medium of instruction which is English. Nationally, however, young learners, particularly those in the early primary years, in South Africa are struggling to acquire the reading skills needed for their future academic and occupational progress (Fleisch, 2008).

With the growing problems of literacy in South Africa, it is known that the causes occur from illiteracy in the society as compared to the lamented unemployment rate (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). To curb national unemployment, it is advisable by Sailors, Hoffman & Matthee (2007) to invest in literacy rather than trying to circumvent the already out of hand situation of unemployment. While literacy alone cannot be the only factor that determines the development of a country, it remains a precondition for economic and social development and most importantly, a reliable indicator of how well a country does educationally (Taylor & Francis, 2000 & Williams 2006).

Children from rural and township areas in South Africa come to school with a foundational knowledge of their home language, which, in this case, is isiZulu. However, some may speak it fluently and some may not but might already know thousands of words to construct a sentence for a conversation (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). Thus, it is vital to determine the advantages of teaching learners in their mother tongue in the Foundation Phase, which is Grade 1 to Grade 3. Teaching learners in their mother tongue in the Foundation Phase is important because it leads them to a better understanding of the curriculum content and a more positive attitude towards school (Angelina, 2015). Learners will be able to read, write, and comprehend, which will help them in the interpretation of any learning area content. If they can read and write in their mother tongue, it will be easy to understand questions and answer them correctly.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

This study highlights that learners who are in the foundation phase do not read at their expected proficiency level, which is Isizulu and English. As a result, they enter secondary school with a huge reading gap (Makalela, 2012, 2014). Furthermore, there are a variety of reasons why learners struggle to comprehend the material they are being taught in English. First, they find it challenging to comprehend instructions provided in the foreign language used for instruction and learning. Furthermore, it is critical to investigate the relationship between mother tongue instruction and improved curriculum comprehension as well as improved attitudes toward education. It is also

important to recognize that the transition from mother tongue instruction to a second language should be gradual, utilizing a bilingual or multilingual approach that begins with mother-tongue instruction and gradually introduces the second language over time. It will support the learners' development of proficiency in both their first and second languages (Coltheart & Prior 2007).

Furthermore, nationally, learners' competency levels are compromised by the teaching and learning language which is English. Hence, learning areas must be also taught in the mother-tongue in the Foundation Phase, as this will improve their reading skills across the curriculum (Angelina, 2015). As shown from the results in the senior phase grades as well as previous results in the Western Cape (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005), literacy proficiency regresses when the learners get to higher grades. For a child to learn better and understand what is being taught, instructions should be in their mother tongue (Angelina 2015). However, the link between language vocabulary in home languages such as IsiZulu and English is not known in South Africa.

### **1.3 Aim of the study**

The study aims to investigate the advantages of teaching and learning in the mother tongue for learners in the foundation phase.

### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

Clear objectives are essential to any study because they provide a focused approach to reaching the study's goals. Objectives outline what the study aims to achieve and serve as measures for evaluating its success.

#### **The objectives of the study are as follows:**

1.4.1 To identify the current proficiency levels of foundation phase learners in reading and writing in isiZulu and to assess the extent of their reading and writing challenges.

1.4.2 To explore how the language of instruction, particularly the use of English instead of isiZulu, impacts learners' comprehension and literacy skills.

1.4.3 To understand why learners struggle with reading and writing in isiZulu by examining factors such as the transition to English, the role of mother tongue instruction, and the effects of a bilingual or multilingual approach on literacy development.

## **1.5 Research questions**

**The research questions for the study are as follows:**

1.5.1 What are the current proficiency levels of foundation phase learners in reading and writing in isiZulu?

1.5.2 How does the language of instruction, particularly the use of English instead of isiZulu, impact learners' comprehension and literacy skills?

1.5.3 How can a bilingual or multilingual approach, beginning with mother-tongue instruction and gradually introducing English, support learners in developing proficiency in both languages?

## **1.6 Rationale of the study**

In South Africa, learners are learning languages at home that differ from the dominant language used in their classrooms mainly English, to teach all learning areas. In addition, these learners arrive at early learning programmes such as pre-school and primary school with a precious resource that is their mother tongue (UNESCO, 2010). However, Cummins (1986) contradicts that, in early schooling, 6 to 8 years of mother tongue teaching and learning are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievements in secondary school. Therefore, learners' ability to learn a second or an additional language will not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction throughout the Foundation Phase. Hence, Thomas & Collier (2002) do confirm that fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lays a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages. As a result, when children receive formal instructions in their first language, such as IsiZulu throughout the Foundation Phase, then gradually transition to academic learning in the second language, they learn their second language quickly (Thomas & Collier 2002).

Mastery of a home language in the Foundation Phase will result in learners being able to study more effectively, do research, and improve on their findings and understanding. Hence, when children understand their home language more, they can link it with other learning areas, courses, or studies (Kosonen, 2005).

## **1.7 Significance of the study**

This study is significant because it explores the benefits of teaching young learners in their mother tongue, isiZulu, to enhance their reading and writing skills. Many learners in South Africa, particularly in the foundation phase, are not achieving the expected reading levels. This situation poses a serious challenge as it impacts their ability to grasp subjects taught in English as they advance in their education (Fleisch, 2008).

By examining the advantages of mother-tongue instruction, this study seeks to demonstrate how it can lead to a better understanding of the curriculum and foster positive attitudes toward education (Angelina, 2015). When children learn in a language that they are familiar with, like isiZulu, they can improve their reading, writing, and comprehension skills. This familiarity enables them to make connections across different subjects.

Furthermore, the findings of this study will provide valuable insights for teachers and policymakers. Educators can adopt new strategies for teaching isiZulu, while policymakers can develop initiatives that support the use of isiZulu as a medium of instruction in schools. This focus on literacy is essential, as it plays a vital role in a country's economic and social development (Murphy, Shannon, Johnston & Hansen, 1998). As Kosonen (2005) points out, mastering their home language allows learners to connect various subjects and boosts their confidence in their learning.

## **1.8 Definitions of terms**

### **Early literacy**

Snow, C. Burns, M. & Griffin (1998) define early literacy as the acquisition of fundamental literacy abilities in young children prior to their formal entry into school. It includes the social-emotional, linguistic, and cognitive abilities that set the stage for eventual reading and writing ability.

### **Foundation Phase**

It is a term used to refer to the first phase of formal schooling. It typically covers the early years of education, focusing on young learners from Grade R (Reception) to Grade 3 (Department of Education, 1997)

### **Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT)**

The language used to give education is referred to as the language of learning and teaching. Within the framework of this investigation, LoLT is operationalized to denote the present-day utilization of English as LoLT in the schools being examined (National Center for Education Statistics 2018).

### **Literacy**

Literacy, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), is the capacity to comprehend, interpret, and utilize a variety of written and printed communication modes in addition to being able to read and write. Being able to access, process, and communicate textual information is a basic ability that is necessary for one's professional, academic, and personal growth.

## **Illiteracy**

Illiteracy is the inability to read and write, which can significantly hinder an individual's ability to function effectively in society (UNESCO, 2006).

## **Non-native**

In the context of language, "non-native speakers" are individuals who are learning or using a language that is not their first language. They may be second-language or foreign-language learners (UNESCO 2003).

## **Disjuncture**

It refers to the mismatch or disconnection between different elements of literacy instruction or literacy policies, according to Peltier, G. (2009). This idea emphasizes the difficulties and contradictions that can occur when attempting to advance literacy, frequently because of things like cultural diversity, social inequality, and discrepancies in educational systems. It is especially pertinent when it comes to literacy programs and educational initiatives, where several components need to function well together to provide desired results.

## **Unilateral**

"Unilateral" refers to choices or actions taken by one individual or body without the consent or involvement of other parties. A single organization or authority's policies, reforms, or changes implemented without seeking input or agreement from other stakeholders, including parents, students, or instructors, can be related to this (Simon, N. S. Johnson, S. M. & Parker, A. 2015).

## **PIRLS**

PIRLS is an acronym for "Progress in International Reading Literacy Study." The reading comprehension abilities of primary and elementary school pupils are measured by means of this worldwide evaluation. A worldwide view of how kids are learning to read is intended to be provided by PIRLS, which is administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (PIRLS).

## **Mother tongue**

A person's mother tongue is the first language they acquire and usually use for communication in their early years, according to UNESCO (2006). It is the language that a person naturally picks up as a youngster via daily interactions with family, caretakers, and peers. The language is frequently spoken within the family or local community. One's cultural and social identity are closely linked to the idea of mother tongue.



## **Multilingualism**

Wei (2018) defines multilingualism as the capacity of an individual or a group of people to speak and comprehend more than one language. The use of two or more languages in daily life is known as multilingualism, and it can take many different forms, from individuals who speak multiple languages fluently to communities where different languages are used for different purposes.

## **Language Acquisition**

Language acquisition is thought to be the outcome of environmental factors, reinforcement learning, and conditioning, (B.F. Skinner 1957). According to this theory, children learn language by mimicking their adults and receiving praise when they use proper grammar

### **1.9 Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1: This chapter contains the context and significance of the study, providing background information, explaining the research problem, and outlining the rationale for the study.

Chapter 2: This chapter contains a review of relevant literature on mother tongue instruction for early learning, focusing on key concepts and studies related to the topic.

Chapter 3: This chapter contains the theoretical framework and methodology used in the study, providing a rationale for the chosen methods and explaining how the research was conducted, including data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: This chapter contains the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the research findings. It discusses the results in relation to the research questions and hypotheses.

Chapter 5: This chapter contains a summary of the findings, conclusions drawn from the research, and recommendations for future research and practical applications.

Chapter 6: This chapter contains a summary of the key findings, limitations, and recommendations for future practice and research. It highlights the benefits of mother-tongue instruction in reducing language barriers and improving educational outcomes for township learners. The chapter concludes with suggestions for enhancing policy implementation, teacher recruitment, and further research on multilingual education strategies.

### **1.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the study was introduced by providing background information to contextualize the research. The research problem, aim, objectives, and central questions were presented, along with

the rationale and significance of the study. This chapter sets the stage for the next chapter, which will review relevant literature to further explore the research topic.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature on language in education in South Africa, focusing on key themes related to the benefits of mother tongue education: multilingualism and language policy, the importance of mother tongue literacy, learning benefits in one's native language, theories of language acquisition, mother tongue education in South Africa, early literacy, and mother tongue anchored learning. These themes were chosen to capture critical aspects of literacy development and the value of mother tongue instruction for supporting educational outcomes in a multilingual context.

### **2.2 Review literature**

#### **2.2.1 Multilingualism and Language Policy in Education**

South Africa recognizes twelve official languages, including isiZulu, and promotes multilingualism as an official policy (LIEP, 1997). However, most schools use English as the main language of instruction (Dikotla, 2009; PRAESA, 2002). While the country's language policy encourages mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase, this is not commonly practiced. As a result, many learners are forced to learn in a second language to access education (PRAESA, 2002). This situation creates a significant challenge, as learners may struggle to understand the material being taught. Alexander and Bloch (2004) emphasize that without a strong foundation in their mother tongue, learners cannot fully grasp their education. Therefore, prioritizing IsiZulu in early literacy education can help learners connect better with their studies and their cultural identity.

#### **2.2.2 The Importance of Mother Tongue Literacy**

Research consistently highlights the importance of literacy skills as a foundation for academic success and lifelong learning (Lyon & Fletcher, 1998). In multilingual societies, learners who struggle with literacy often come from communities where the dominant language of instruction, such as English, is not spoken at home. This language barrier can hinder their ability to engage fully with the curriculum and succeed academically. For instance, families where parents may have limited formal education or literacy in English face additional challenges, as they may find it difficult to support their children's schooling effectively (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016). When educators incorporate mother tongue instruction, they help bridge this critical gap by making learning more accessible and directly applicable to students' home environments. This approach also empowers children to discuss school topics with their families, who can understand the content more easily, fostering a positive feedback loop between home and school. Moreover, using mother tongue

languages in the classroom has been shown to improve early literacy development and cultivate a lifelong enthusiasm for learning among young learners (Makalela, 2021). This interconnectedness between home and school supports cognitive development, helps learners to overcome academic challenges, and promotes a stronger cultural identity through the preservation and use of native languages.

### **2.2.3 Benefits of Learning in the Mother Tongue**

Angelina (2015) argues that using the home language in education during the Foundation Phase leads to a better understanding of the curriculum and a more positive attitude towards school. Learning begins at home in a child's mother tongue. However, many parents in South Africa worry that learning in isiZulu will hinder their children's ability to speak English fluently (Jankie, 2010). Despite these concerns, Cummins (2001) states that mother tongue instruction not only strengthens the home language but also supports learning in other languages. Unfortunately, many parents prioritize English for their children's education, which may violate children's rights to learn in a language they understand (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). This decision can lead to poor literacy skills in both isiZulu and English, resulting in code switching, where learners mix languages (e.g. "ngihungry" for "I am hungry") (Jankie, 2010).

### **2.2.4 Theories of Language Acquisition and Their Relevance**

Behaviorists, like B.F. Skinner, argue that language acquisition and development are learned behaviors. They believe that we learn by associating events, known as classical conditioning, and we also learn through rewards and punishment, a system which is operant conditioning, and through another aspect of behaviorism which is learned by observation and imitation (Skinner, 1957). However, Chomsky (1986) believes that infants and children learn a language at a speed that cannot simply be explained by the laws of behaviorism. According to Chomsky (1981), children learn a language by putting words together in new ways, creating meaningful sentences they have never heard before. Chomsky argues that children learn rules of language and apply them in their way often inaccurately at first.

In Chomsky's linguistic theory it is stated that we are born with an innate ability to learn a language, and with little guidance children will naturally learn a language. He argues that as we age, language acquisition becomes more difficult, especially for adults learning a new language. Children learning new languages outperform adults learning new languages in terms of vocabulary, applying rules of grammar, and speaking with the correct accent (Chomsky, 1986). The critical period hypothesis states that we have a time frame for learning a new language, and once that time is over, language acquisition becomes more difficult. Hence it is important that at Foundation Phase, the mother tongue needs to mature in the child and must excel in it, to avoid a barrier of interpreting the English

language to understand a lesson being taught. Therefore, it is vital that the mother tongue receives a critical period in the child's language development stage, so that it becomes natural to learn a new language.

Research in children's development and experience in early childhood education has shown that young children have unique styles that match their stages of development (Gallahue, 1993). Therefore, their environmental education needs to be designed to match their developmental needs, interest, abilities and learning styles using mother tongue in the early Foundation Phase (White & Stoeckling, 2008) which will enhance effective outcomes on their learning. Consequently, this calls for mother tongue education, which affords children opportunities to learn through the language with which they are most familiar. Encouraging young children to learn through their mother tongue, according to (Senadeera, 2010), it helps them to develop confidence, self-esteem, and their unique identity within a multicultural society. Hetchter (1994) further stated that mother tongue is one of the most powerful tools used to identify cultural differences in a multi-ethnic society. It provides children with a sense of belonging. When children are required to acquire an unknown language in an unknown cultural pattern, they are likely to experience anxiety. Thus, they may tend to react very differently to such intense experiences (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). Using English as a medium of instruction during early learning makes many black South African learners face language barriers in the classroom at the Foundation Phase.

Hallberg (2010) says that a language barrier is a kind of psychological barrier in which language is a psychological tool that affects the communication being put across. As a result, language barriers are often caused when learners communicate and learn in a language which they do not usually use at home and are not competent in to learn effectively. Owen- Smith (2010) concurs by emphasizing that children who cannot use the language they are most familiar with, usually the home language, are unlikely to perform well in their literacy tasks. Moreover, AfriForum CEO, Kallie Kriel indicates that it has been proven repeatedly that learners cannot understand English (South African Press Association, 2010:6). Therefore, unless children are competent in their first language, they will always experience cognitive difficulties in their second language. In view of the above, the central argument of this study is that proficiency in the mother tongue is viewed as the basis for learning another language.

### **2.2.5 Mother-tongue education in South Africa**

Andrew (2012) states that the South African Constitution (1996) encourages learners to have the right to receive education, however limiting the right of self-expression to choose in which language to receive the education, for academic progress. UNESCO (2008) suggests that learners entering

school can learn best through their mother tongue and that a second language such as English is easy to acquire if the learner has a firm grasp of his/ her home language. Furthermore, research shows the poor throughput rates in South African schools where barely a quarter of African language learners who enter the schooling system are likely to reach matric. This indicates that the current practice of using English as the initial language of teaching and learning is at least one of the contributing factors to this. For some years, the education policy has proposed that learners should be taught in their mother tongue for at least three years of school, at Foundation Phase before changing to the medium of English (LIEP, 1997). Furthermore, also the Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga (2010) announced that: The language chosen by the learner as a language of learning and teaching shall be taught as a subject or as a first additional language, from Grade 1 and not from Grade 2. The teaching of English would therefore occur alongside mother tongue instruction for those learners who choose English as the LoLT. For this purpose, English will subsequently not replace the home language in the early grade.

Following this line of thinking, it is clear that mother tongue should be adopted as the language of learning and teaching from Grade 1 to Grade 3 whilst teaching English as a subject. This is based to address the high failure rate experienced by black African learners in South Africa. Another reason for this adoption is based on encouraging learners to be competent in both languages. Basically, it has already been demonstrated in research conducted internationally (cited by Geneese, Paradis & Crago, 2004) as well as in South Africa (Heugh, 2000 & Macdonald, 1990) that learners are able to develop academic language proficiency more effectively in their home language or alternatively, in multilingual education. In addition, (Department of Education, 2002) states that learners or their parents have the right to inform the school of language(s) they wish to be taught in when applying for admission. Bearing in mind that South Africa is a multilingual society, for the language policy to be implemented successfully, a provision should be available to cater for learners whose home language is not offered in the school where they are seeking admission, hence, that will be determined by the availability of resources to meet such demands.

A research review of young dual language learners in childhood education concluded that it is not necessary or effective to rush young children into the English medium of instruction and learning (UNESCO, 2008). It is argued that what they learn in their home language will transfer easily into English as they get older. For this reason, the basic foundational knowledge in both languages will enable them to build on prior knowledge to keep up with the learning at school. This foundation of knowledge is what supports the successful transition to English later. Moreover, research has shown that the connection between words in the home language and English is one of the most effective strategies for literacy development (Karen, 2010).

This study aims to bring new ideas on the importance of mother tongue instruction to remove the stigma that Alexander (2004) notes when stating that African emancipation cannot be cultivated, expanded, or developed. As a result, learning in the mother tongue can be used to improve the ideologies of a country concerning the value of mother tongue.

Buthelezi (2011) highlights that literacy rates, particularly in reading and writing, are a significant issue in South Africa. This is evident from the 2011 international reading literacy study, which showed that South African Grade 5 learners scored, on average, 80 points below the international average of 500 points for Grade 4 learners. This alarming statistic emphasizes the need to shift the attitudes of both parents and teachers toward promoting mother tongue instruction in schools. However, the implementation of the language learning and teaching (LoLT) policy at the Foundation Phase has been slow due to various challenges. Many parents believe that their children will achieve greater success if they attend schools where English is the primary language of instruction. They often think that these schools offer better resources and more qualified teachers, which they believe will enhance their children's academic performance. Unfortunately, this perception can lead them to underestimate the importance of teaching in their children's mother tongue. When parents insist that their children learn in a language they do not fully understand, it can negatively impact their academic progress.

Additionally, some teachers hold negative attitudes toward teaching in the mother tongue, fearing it might lead to issues like institutional racism. In many cases, school governing bodies make unilateral decisions to adopt English as the main language of learning, disregarding the benefits of mother tongue instruction. This approach often neglects the needs of learners who may learn more effectively in their own language. Furthermore, some school principals encourage parents to support English as the language of learning to boost enrollment. While this strategy may seem beneficial for attracting more learners, it can create significant problems. When learners struggle to understand the language being used in the classroom, it becomes a barrier to their learning and hinders their overall success.

For literacy to be improved, mother tongue-based bilingual programmes must be introduced. Cummins (2000) advocates that mother tongue has significant pedagogical advantages, like the facilitation of understanding of sound-symbol or meaning symbol correspondence. This enables the learners to learn to read because they will be able to employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies, unlike learning to decode words in another language. Moreover, Cummins states that content area instruction will be provided in the mother tongue, as it enables teachers and learners to interact naturally and creates a participatory learning environment that leads to language and cognitive

development. As a result, when children have basic literacy skills in their mother tongue and can communicate in other languages, they can start reading and writing and can transfer literacy skills.

Furthermore, in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) study of 2016, South Africa was placed last out of all 50 countries who participated with a mean score of 320. The results show that in most of the languages, learners achieved higher reading literacy scores if they wrote in their home language, and learners who wrote in English and spoke their mother tongue language at home achieved higher scores. The study also found out that parents who often read stories, sang songs, played with their children, and spoke to them using their mother tongue, before the child started school achieved higher scores than those whose parents never or rarely did any early literacy activities.

Moreover, the study stated that there was no change overall in the score between PIRLS 2011 and PIRLS 2016. However, it stated that school factors that were analyzed revealed that three-quarters of Grade 4 learners came from poor backgrounds whilst learners from affluent backgrounds attained significantly higher reading achievements. It was stated that learners who performed at the lowest average are those without libraries. Hence, it is vital that home language school material should be made available for learners at schools to build their vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore PIRLS 2021 also revealed that 81% of learners in Grade 4 cannot read for meaning and one of the recommended solution was for the policy to be revised, specifically the time available for reading and writing, where currently the curriculum provides 6 hours for home language per week where the period of six hours is divided among the different skills the learners must be competed in, which then leaves the skill of reading with less time.

### **2.2.6 Early literacy and mother tongue development**

According to De Klerk (2002), in multilingual societies there is a dire need for early literacy and language development in the mother tongue, since English is required to be accessible to all learners in teaching and learning in the school environment. Because parents insist that their children be taught in English, teachers were convinced that learners were bright, but only had language-related problems and therefore encouraged intervention by themselves, parents, learners, and learning materials (De Klerk, 2002). Struggling learners (isiXhosa speaking) had to cover the school curriculum when they were taught to read and write in their mother tongue and parents had to read simple stories to their children. Furthermore, an English speaker was paired with a non-English-speaking child in class, extra lessons were given, and English had to be always used. Learners were advised to watch English children's programmes on television and parents had to help with homework. University students were even paid to assist where help was needed. This initiative was successful but could have been implemented at pre-school level already (De Klerk, 2002).



Furthermore, De Klerk's (2002) study showed that learners' confidence and self-esteem improved tremendously with intervention as discussed above. The fact however remains that reading and speaking English were largely instrumental in helping children who had no English backgrounds when they started school. Yet more hours were added to make sure learners understood, this would have been avoided (more hours) if the mother tongue had been implemented to bridge the gap between the home and school. Multiple assistance from the study could have been avoided if the mother tongue was introduced after seeing the children's program on television. This proves that teaching in the English language might have content that requires multiple interpretations (Xhosa learners speaking who were challenged in understanding the English television program). For a learner to understand this could have been bridged if mother tongue was introduced or used in the study.

UNESCO (2003) states that children first learn their mother tongue before picking up a second language later in life. This means that when children arrive at school, they already have knowledge of their mother tongue, which schools can use to build on what they already know (Cummins, 2001). Children learn their first language by listening to their parents or caregivers, helping them understand and speak the language used around them. However, Archarya (2009) points out that the experience children gain from learning their mother tongue at home may not be enough to give them the academic skills they need, such as reading and writing. Archarya explains that schools teach language to help students find the right words and sentences to express their ideas.

Therefore, a strong foundation in a child's mother tongue is crucial for learning another language. Cummins (2001) emphasizes that having a solid base in their first language is a key predictor of how well children will develop their second language skills. Cook (2001) also adds that learners can pick up a second language more quickly if they first learn in their home language.

### **2.2.7 Mother tongue anchoring learning**

There is currently overwhelming evidence that learning through the mother tongue helps to anchor learning in the child's immediate environment (Fleisch, 2011; Dikotla, 2009; Fleisch, 2008 and Alexander & Bloch, 2004). Learners, who are taught in their first few years in their first language, while their second language (which is either an additional or foreign language) is gradually introduced as a subject, become more proficient in all languages learned. According to linguists and researchers (Dikotla, 2009; PRAESA, 2002) "mother tongue instruction in such instances provides the foundation for better and deeper learning with understanding by linking the new knowledge to everyday life, as well as linking it to the learner's own identity" (Ramphole, 2009, Alexander & Bloch, 2004, & de Klerk, 2002).

This proves that the practice of introducing other languages on a very firm foundation of mother-tongue instruction, during the Foundation Phase of schooling will ultimately align learning to the cultural heritage of learners, thereby allowing parents to actively participate in their children's learning. African parents' participation in their children's education is cited as one of the major concerns according to O' Conner and Geiger (2009). This is due to that, English/Afrikaans is not the home language for many South African homes, parents are unable to assist their children with reading homework, which is in a foreign language. However, parents could participate and add much value, using their rich cultural heritage if mother tongue instructions in the Foundation Phase were fully implemented (Alexander & Bloch, 2004; PRAESA, 2002), further allowing parents to be involved in assisting with homework.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

This chapter shows how learning in a child's home language helps them understand and succeed better in school. Teaching in a language learners know well can make learning easier, keep them engaged, and support their reading and writing skills over time. Research shows that using mother tongue languages in school can improve learning for African students and make education fairer. The next chapter examines the research design. It explains the sampling method and the research approaches the researcher followed when collecting data.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, the literature review was discussed, giving an overview of existing research related to this study. This chapter builds on that by introducing the theoretical framework and research design. Framing the study with a solid theory is important because it helps guide the research and shows how the ideas in the study connect with broader concepts. This chapter will explain the research methods used, how the data was collected, and how it was analyzed to answer the research questions. The research design ensures that the study is reliable and can be repeated. By clearly explaining the methods, this chapter connects with the previous chapter by providing the practical steps needed to carry out the ideas discussed in the literature review.

### **3.2 Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by the Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) Theory, which views language as a resource and a fundamental human right. The idea that language should be treated as a resource was developed by scholars such as Neville Alexander and Quentin Williams, who highlighted the importance of linguistic diversity and its role in empowering communities (Alexander, 2007; Williams, 2017). Language as a resource theory argues that all languages are equally capable of expressing human thoughts, emotions, and complex ideas, making them invaluable resources for individuals and society (Alexander, 2007). This theory is supported by scholars like Kamwangamalu (2015) and Heugh (2011), who have applied it in studies advocating for mother-tongue education and linguistic equity in multilingual societies.

The Linguistic Human Rights Theory was developed to counter policies that undervalue local languages and to promote linguistic justice by encouraging the use of indigenous languages in education and governance. It emerged from the field of language planning, which seeks to protect and nurture linguistic diversity, especially in multilingual societies like South Africa. Braam (2004) and Bamgbose (2000) also view language as a national resource, similar to natural resources like petroleum or minerals, emphasizing that it is essential to national identity and unity.

However, this theory has its challenges. Critics argue that treating language purely as a resource can overlook its cultural and emotional significance and may reduce complex languages to tools for economic or political purposes. Some, like Prah (2009), argue that the focus on language planning often overlooks practical barriers, such as a lack of educational resources and trained teachers for African languages. Bamgbose (2000) also notes that while people theoretically have the freedom to choose their language of education, socio-political and economic pressures often limit these choices. English, for example, is frequently chosen as the language of instruction even though it might not best serve African language speakers' educational needs.

This theory is suitable for this study because it aligns with the aim of promoting IsiZulu as a medium of instruction to support early literacy development. By framing language as a resource, the study highlights the benefits of mother tongue education and argues for equal treatment of African languages in educational settings.

### **3.3 Research Methodology**

A clear methodology is essential in a research study to ensure that it is well organized, reliable, and valid. According to Strydom & Venter (2002), the methodology should include details about the participants, target schools, sampling plan, data collection procedures, and instruments used. It also covers the research design, which provides the structure for the study and guides how data will be collected and analysed.

#### **3.3.1 Research Design**

This study is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm, which focuses on exploring and understanding human experiences and social phenomena. Qualitative research is particularly valuable in studying complex, real life situations as it enables the researcher to gather detailed insights and understand underlying reasons and opinions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This approach is suitable for exploring the advantages of mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase, as it captures the nuanced perspectives of teachers and learners within their natural educational settings. According to Ezzy (2002), qualitative methods help researchers uncover individuals' understanding of their situations rather than assuming predefined meanings, making it ideal for studying how mother tongue instruction affects early literacy.

Within the qualitative paradigm, this study employs a case study methodology across three schools. A case study allows the researcher to explore the topic deeply within specific contexts, helping to build tacit knowledge about the participants' lived experiences and actions (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). This method is particularly beneficial for capturing the unique educational practices and challenges faced by IsiZulu speaking learners, as it highlights how theoretical concepts play out in real world situations. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) also support this view, stating that case studies provide clear, relatable examples of real people in real situations, making complex ideas easier to understand than abstract theories alone.

Furthermore, as Welman, Kruger, and Mitchell (2005) emphasize, case study research emphasizes the uniqueness of each case and aims to understand its complexity. By focusing on specific schools and classrooms, this approach ensures that the study remains relevant to the experiences of its participants, offering an in-depth perspective on the impact of mother tongue instruction in early education.

### **3.4 Sampling Strategy**

Sampling is an important part of research that comes from deciding who or what the study will focus on. In other words, sampling involves choosing a smaller group from a larger population to study. This smaller group, or "sample," represents the larger group, or "population," that the research is interested in (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). For example, if the study is about students in a certain grade, the sample would be a selected group of learners from that grade who represent the whole class or school. By focusing on a sample, researchers can gather information that helps them understand the larger population without need to study every single person.

### **3.5 Sampling technique**

This study employed convenient sampling to select the target schools, with a focus specifically on a school that use English as a medium of instruction. According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) regard convenient sampling as choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sampling size has been obtained. To ensure representative sampling, the schools were chosen amongst many schools in the Gauteng province under the Ekurhuleni district (D 16) in Johannesburg City, Germiston town based on the school's commitment to the realization of mother tongue education.

Henning (2004) highlights that the need for extra sampling may arise during the process of the study. Considering this, the purposive sampling technique was deemed suitable for this study. Purposive sampling is accommodated to select five learners from a Grade 3 classroom based on their performance in learning through the mother tongue, and in learning through the second language for those learners who attend a school where English is used as a medium of instruction. One of the learners' parents was selected as a sample for cross-checking the responses given by learners and grade three teachers in the interview.

### **3.6 Research Site**

The research was conducted at three primary schools located in the Ekurhuleni South area of Johannesburg. These schools admit learners from Grade R to Grade 7 and serve as a main feeder school for the junior secondary school where the researcher has previously worked. Each of these schools is classified as quantile 1, meaning they are in a low-income area and qualify for government funding, allowing learners to attend without paying school fees. This classification is important because it helps ensure that education is accessible to all learners, regardless of their financial situation.

The schools serve both boys and girls and are governed by a School Governing Body (SGB). The SGB includes elected members from the parent community, who are chosen every three years according to the requirements of the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996). This structure allows parents and community members to be actively involved in the decisions and policies of the school, ensuring that the needs of the learners and the community are met.

### **3.7 Target Population**

According to Welman, Kruger & Mitchell (2005), a population encompasses the total collection of all units of analysis about which the researcher wishes to make specific conclusions. A population in this context will refer to the Grade 3 teachers, a sample of five Grade 3 learners from primary schools, as well as the parents of these learners, teachers. A description of all the participants will be provided in chapter 4.

The researcher selected five learners from each of the three primary schools involved in the study. These learners were chosen based on their performance in learning

through English as the language of instruction. This information was gathered from the Grade 3 learners' first-term assessment reports provided by their class teachers. All the selected learners speak isiZulu as their home language. Although they come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, isiZulu remains their primary language of communication at home.

### 3.8 Data collection

According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), there are many data collection methods available for qualitative research, such as interviews, observations, field notes, audio recordings, documents, and video recordings. Qualitative researchers are flexible in choosing methods, as they can select whichever tools best fit the study's goals.

In this study, two main methods were used: classroom observations and interviews. Classroom observations allowed the researcher to watch and record how learners and teachers interact and how mother tongue instruction is used in real lessons. This helped capture the actual experiences in the classroom. Interviews were conducted with teachers and learners, and to gather their personal insights and opinions on learning in the mother tongue during the Foundation Phase. These interviews helped the researcher understand each group's experiences, beliefs, and challenges with mother tongue instruction, providing a fuller picture of its impact.

**Table 3.8.1 Summary of data gathering table.**

<b>RESEARCH INSTRUMENT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>NO OF RESPONSES</b>
Observation	Written Schedule	3 Educators
Interviews	19 questions for learners	15 Learners
	10 questions for teachers	3 Teachers
	12 questions for parents	15 Parents

### **3.9 Classroom observation**

There are two types of observation, namely, simple observation, where a researcher remains an outside observer, and participant observation where a researcher is simultaneously a member of the group, he/she is studying. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In this study, the researcher used a simple observation method and an observation schedule to collect data. There were items on the schedule to be completed during the observation. The researcher observed where English was used by the teacher in presenting her lessons and where learners learned through the mother tongue. The researcher observed the classroom activities and particularly concentrated on the mother tongue usage. The following were the focal points of the observations:

1. Dominating language(s) in the classrooms during activities.
2. How the teachers and the learners sometimes code-switch and mix languages when communicating.
3. The way the teachers motivate the learners to use other mother tongues.

### **3.10 Interviews**

Interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and express how they regard situations from their own perspective (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In research, there are three types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Welmen, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. According to Welmen, Kruger & Mitchell (2005), such interviews accommodate all age groups and allow the interviewer to make a genuine assessment of what the respondents believe (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Interviews were conducted over the course of one term on agreed-upon days with teachers and learners during break times and parents were interviewed at their respective homes to avoid them having to travel to school throughout the interview process. Rubin (1995) describes interviewing as a way of discovering what others feel and think about their worlds, while Weiss (1994) states that interviewing gives researchers a "window on the past." Individual interviews were conducted with all learners and teachers. A phone or voice recorder was used to capture each interview,



and after every session, recordings were reviewed to ensure accuracy. Notes were also taken during each interview in case of any issues with the recorder.

### **3.11 Data Processing and Analysis**

Data analysis is about understanding the data from the participants' viewpoints, looking for patterns, themes, categories, and common ideas (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This study uses a thematic analysis approach to analyze the data. Thematic analysis involves identifying and organizing themes or main ideas that come up in the data. By finding these themes, the researcher can highlight key points and better explain the experiences of the participants.

The researcher plays an important role as an interpreter in this process, organizing the data so that readers can easily understand the findings. This means making sense of the data, like field notes and interview responses, by organizing them in a clear and meaningful way (De Vos, 2002). In this study, data analysis will focus on examining how using mother tongue instruction affects teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase. By identifying themes, the researcher can show the benefits, challenges, and overall impact of teaching in the mother tongue for young learners.

### **3.12 Techniques used to interpret and analyse data.**

A fundamental technique in the analysis and interpretation of data in qualitative research is that of discovering the classes of things, persons, and events and the properties that characterize those (De Vos, 2002). However, (Streubel & Carpenter, 1999) caution that during this process, researchers must keep personal bias aside throughout the investigation, especially since qualitative investigations on research such as interviews are intense and personal in nature. To prevent the development of a personal relationship between participants and the researcher, these authors suggest the use of the technique called “bracketing”. This technique is defined as the process of putting aside one’s own beliefs, not making judgments about what one has observed or heard and remaining open to the data as it is presented.

To prevent the above from happening, the analysis procedures identified by De Vos (2002) include the collection and recording of data, managing the data, reading, and writing memos, describing, classifying, and interpreting, and lastly representing or visualizing.

- 1. Collection and recording of data:** The researcher conducted using field notes and the voice recorder with a cell phone. The researcher made certain that the phone had enough battery for the duration of the interviews.
- 2. Managing the data:** In this study, data was managed through transcribing from the voice recorder through the researcher's cell phone in word format.
- 3. Reading and writing:** After transferring the data from the voice recorder, transcripts were read repeatedly to be familiar with the gathered information. This is also supported by De Vos (2002) when he states that the qualitative researcher continues analyzing by getting a feel for the whole database.
- 4. Coding the data:** The researcher then started coding the data. This means that similar ideas or responses were grouped together to identify key themes or patterns. Coding helps to organize the data so that important information can be easily found and analyzed.
- 5. Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting:** The researcher described and classified the data based on what was found. This involved looking for similarities and differences in the responses to better understand the participants' experiences.
- 6. Member Checking:** After analyzing the data, the researcher used a method called member checking. This means going back to the participants to share the findings and get their feedback. This helps ensure that the interpretations are accurate and that their voices are represented correctly.

Finally, the researcher presented the study's findings by discussing the results and determining whether the data helped meet the study's aims. The data was summarized and linked to the reviewed literature, the approaches discussed, and the integrated model of mother tongue education that was developed. This process ensured a thorough analysis and a clear understanding of the impact of mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase.

### **3.13 Reliability**

Reliability is concerned with the findings of the research and relates to the credibility of the findings (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005). To ensure reliability in this study, field notes were used where observations were documented to check whether there

was corroboration between my findings and the information given by the participants. Hence documenting data becomes a central basis for assessing reliability and that of succeeding interpretations (Flick, 2009). Reliability was also ensured by checking concretely the interview guides, generative questions in test interviews and after the first interview against other passages in the same text or against other text such as the notes that were recorded during the observations. (Flick, 2009) emphasize that if reliability is used it may be more susceptible to mistrust rather than to trust the dependability of the data.

### **3.14 Validity**

The question of grounding this study is ensured by validity. Welman, Kruger & Mitchell (2005) define validity to the extent to which the research findings accurately represent what is happening in the situation. In this study, the researcher acted as a non-participant observer, which means the researcher observed the lesson without getting involved. By not speaking in the classroom, the researcher could pay close attention to what was happening and gather clear, reliable data. This careful observation allowed the researcher to record accurate information about the teaching and learning processes.

To further ensure the validity of the study, the researcher sought feedback on the findings and presentations from participants in the field. This means the researcher shared the results with teachers, to check if the findings made sense to them and reflected their experiences. This step is important because it helps confirm that the research accurately represents their views and experiences.

Overall, the process of ensuring validity and reliability in this study aimed to be careful and sensitive to the experiences of participants (Flick, 2009). By using these methods, the researcher worked hard to make sure the study's findings are trustworthy and reflect the real situations in the classrooms.

### **3.15 Ethical Considerations**

When designing a research study, a researcher must follow important ethical principles. These principles include informed consent, respecting privacy and confidentiality, protecting participants from harm, and ensuring there's no deception of participants (Gilbert, 2008).

## **1. Applying for Ethical Clearance**

The first step was applying for ethical clearance. Ethical clearance is the approval from the university to conduct the research. This protects both the researcher and the university, ensuring that the study meets all ethical guidelines. By getting this approval, the researcher shows they are committed to the rights and safety of all participants.

## **2. Initial Contact with the School Community**

After receiving ethical clearance, the researcher then reached out to the principals, teachers, learners, and parents of the learners involved in the study. This step was to introduce the study and make sure everyone understood the goals and purpose of the research.

## **3. Informed Consent**

Participation in this research was completely voluntary. The researcher explained the aims and objectives of the study to everyone involved, especially the parents and guardians of the young learners. A letter of consent was given to each participant, explaining their rights, the purpose of the study, and how the information would be used.

## **4. Special Care for Young Learners**

Since the study involved young learners, extra care was taken to make sure they understood what they were participating in. Children think and communicate differently from adults, so the researcher used age-appropriate methods, like simple focus group discussions, as recommended by Merton & Kendal (1946). This was suitable for the Grade 3 learners, who were between 9 and 11 years old.

## **5. Privacy and Confidentiality**

Privacy means respecting each person's right to keep certain information personal, while confidentiality means that any information shared will be kept private. The researcher carefully explained to participants that their identities would remain anonymous. Pseudonyms were used for all 3 schools and for all the participants. According to Strydom & Venter (2002), privacy could be violated if recording devices are used without permission, so the researcher made sure to ask permission before using a voice recorder on a cellphone.

## **6. Using the Voice Recorder**

Before starting any interviews, the researcher explained the role of the voice recorder and assured participants that recorded information would be securely stored and destroyed at the end of the study. Participants were informed that they could ask to switch off the recorder at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

## **7. Preventing Harm**

The researcher took steps to ensure no participant would experience emotional or physical harm during the study (Strydom & Venter, 2002). At the start of each interview, participants were informed of any potential risks, though these were minimal. The researcher gave everyone the freedom to stop participating at any time if they wished, reinforcing that they could withdraw without any negative consequences.

By following these steps, the researcher ensured that the study respected participants' rights, privacy, and well-being, keeping them safe and informed throughout the research process.

### **3.16 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the research methods used in the study, including design, sampling techniques, data collection, and ethical considerations. A qualitative approach provided in-depth insights into the impact of mother tongue instruction in early education. By carefully selecting the sample and using interviews and observations, the researcher gathered meaningful data to address the study's aims.

Chapter 4 will present and analyze the data, identifying key themes and patterns related to the advantages of teaching in IsiZulu for young learners. The chapter also discussed the Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) Theory, which views language as a basic human right and supports the use of IsiZulu to help children develop early literacy skills, despite challenges like limited resources and teacher training.

## **Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents and analyzes data to examine the benefits of teaching and learning in isiZulu for early literacy development among mother tongue speakers. The analysis addresses the study's core objectives by focusing on how isiZulu instruction influences literacy skills and attitudes toward learning. The researcher came up with themes that were identified from raw data. The themes from the data were directed by the research questions as indicated in chapter 1, and are as follows:

- **Impact on Comprehension:** How learning in isiZulu enhances understanding of curriculum content.
- **Positive Attitude towards School:** How familiarity with isiZulu builds learners' confidence and engagement.
- **Bilingual Approach Benefits:** The value of starting with isiZulu before gradually introducing English.

### **4.2 Summary of themes and categories used to analyse interviews and classroom observations.**

In Chapter 3, it was explained that qualitative research involves organizing data into categories based on similar themes, concepts, or characteristics (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). For this study, data from interviews and classroom observations were grouped into themes that reflect how the use of isiZulu as a medium of instruction supports early literacy development. These themes provide insight into the current role of mother tongue instruction in Grade 3 classrooms and its impact on learners' literacy skills and attitudes.

#### **Themes and Categories for Analysis:**

##### **1. Impact on Comprehension**

- **Curriculum Understanding:** How isiZulu instruction supports learners' understanding of classroom content.
- **Reading and Writing Skills:** The influence of isiZulu on learners' foundational literacy skills, particularly reading comprehension and writing.

## 2. Positive Attitude toward School

- **Learner Confidence:** Observations of increased confidence and active participation among learners instructed in isiZulu.
- **Engagement and Motivation:** Evidence of learners' positive attitudes, including enthusiasm and willingness to engage in class activities.

## 3. Bilingual Approach Benefits

- **Gradual Transition to English:** How the structured introduction of English alongside isiZulu promotes balanced language development.
- **Improved Language Proficiency:** Observations on how early isiZulu literacy forms a basis for acquiring English skills.

### 4.3 The contextual analysis and background of the participants

This section provides an overview of the background of the schools involved in the study, along with details about the Grade 3 teachers, learners, and their parents. Understanding the context of each participant group offers insight into the broader social and cultural factors influencing early literacy development in isiZulu.

- **School Context:** The schools participating in the study are in predominantly isiZulu speaking communities, where most learners speak isiZulu as their home language. The community's strong linguistic and cultural connection to isiZulu supports the relevance of mother tongue instruction, as it aligns with the everyday language of communication for both learners and their families.
- **Grade 3 Teachers:** The teachers involved in the study are often from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds as the learners and their families, typically speaking isiZulu as their first language. Many of these teachers have grown up in the same or nearby communities, giving them a deep understanding of the cultural values, communication styles, and learning needs of their students. This shared background enables teachers to use culturally relevant examples and expressions in class, fostering a comfortable learning environment that builds on students' prior knowledge. Additionally, their own experience with bilingual education informs their approach, often valuing the gradual introduction of English while initially reinforcing isiZulu literacy.
- **Parents:** The parents of the learners also play an important role in early literacy development. Since most parents speak isiZulu as their first language, they can support their children's learning in isiZulu at home. Parents can help with

reading and storytelling in isiZulu, which strengthens literacy skills and connects school learning with home life. This strong involvement from parents, who are familiar with the language and culture, supports a positive environment for literacy development in isiZulu.

- **Learners:** The learners in the study are mainly Grade 3 students who speak isiZulu at home and within their communities. For many, isiZulu is their first language and the language they are most comfortable with. This familiarity helps them learn more effectively when lessons are delivered in isiZulu. Learning in their mother tongue makes it easier for them to understand new concepts, participate in class discussions, and connect what they learn in school with their experiences at home. As they build literacy skills in isiZulu, they gain confidence in reading and writing, which can later support learning in other languages, like English.

#### 4.3.1 Profile of the Primary school and Grade 3 Learners

The pseudonym of the three (3) Primary schools is: School A, School B, and School C. All three (3) schools are in Gauteng province under the Ekurhuleni district (D 16) in Johannesburg as mentioned in chapter 3. School A and School B have three (3) Grade 3. School C has only two (2) Grade 3's. One teacher is responsible for teaching Grade 3's in all these 3 selected schools. The researcher worked with the three (3) responsible Grade 3 teachers which were one (1) male and two (2) females.

**Table 4.3.2 Profile of Grade 3 Teachers**

Schools	Teachers	Number of learners in a class	Teacher qualification	Experience in
School A	Teacher A	50	ACE	23
School B	Teacher B	41	B. Ed	15
School C	Teacher C	45	PGCE	13



**Table 4.3.3 Profile of Primary School learners**

<b>Learner</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Home Language</b>	<b>Age</b>
1. Learner A	Male	Isizulu	8
2. Learner B	Female	Isizulu	9
3. Learner C	Male	Isizulu	8
4. Learner D	Female	Isizulu	7
5. Learner E	Female	Isizulu	8
6. Learner F	Male	Isizulu	7
7. Learner G	Female	Isizulu	9
8. Learner H	Female	Isizulu	8
9. Learner I	Male	Isizulu	9
10. Learner J	Female	Isizulu	8
11. Learner K	Male	Isizulu	7
12. Learner L	Male	Isizulu	7
13. Learner M	Female	Isizulu	8
14. Learner N	Female	Isizulu	8
15. Learner O	Female	Isizulu	9

**Table 4.3.4 Profile of parents**

<b>Parent</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Home Language</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Highest level of Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1. Parent A	Female	Isizulu	45	Grade 12	Unemployed
2. Parent B	Female	Isizulu	60	Grade 10	Unemployed
3. Parent C	Female	Isizulu	38	Bed Degree	Teacher
4. Parent D	Female	Isizulu	36	Nursing Degree	Nurse
5. Parent E	Male	Isizulu	34	Doctor of Pharmacy	Pharmacist
6. Parent F	Male	Isizulu	37	B. com in economic	Truck driver

7. Parent G	Female	Isizulu	50	Business Management	Catering company
8. Parent H	Female	Isizulu	34	Certificate in Safety	Police
9. Parent I	Male	Isizulu	40	Business Management Certificate	Manager
10. Parent J	Male	Isizulu	42	Degree in Medicine	Medical Doctor
11. Parent K	Female	Isizulu	33	Grade 12	Police
12. Parent L	Male	Isizulu	37	Honors degree in Education	Facilitator
13. Parent M	Female	Isizulu	31	Bed Education	Teacher
14. Parent N	Female	Isizulu	51	Grade 12	Unemployed
15. Parent O	Female	Isizulu	48	Grade 10	Unemployed

Parents were included in this study to understand how family background and home support influence early literacy development in isiZulu. Research shows that parental involvement and positive attitudes towards mother-tongue education can enhance children's literacy skills and confidence (Makalela, 2022; Mbedzi & Mthombeni, 2023). Examining parents' educational backgrounds and occupations provides insight into the social and cultural factors that support learning in isiZulu, reinforcing literacy skills learned at school (Ngwenya, 2021).

#### **4.4 The importance of learning to read and write through the mother tongue.**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, mother tongue is a precious treasure which makes a child arrive at school with knowledge that may be used to build on what he/she already knows (Cummins, 2001). Linguists and educational psychologists agree that the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in the early years of education has many advantages; in this study the researcher identified the following three categories through the interviews with the Grade 3 learners, parents, and classroom observations.

- Mother tongue as an indicator of cultural identity

- Mother tongue for mental/cognitive growth
- Mother tongue as a basis for learning another language.

As stated in chapter 2, mother tongue provides the foundation for the child's ability to learn another language Cummins, (2001). Thus, learners learn a second language faster when learning is first done in their first language (Cook, 2001). The experience of the Grade 3 teacher during her schooling is evidence of the importance of learning through the mother tongue. This is what she said:

Extract 1

***“It is important to learn in the mother tongue before learning in any foreign language. I read a lot more in IsiZulu than in any other language. When I was in Grade 3 already, I could fluently read on my own, and this gave me an opportunity to learn how to read in English.” Teacher interview, (2021)***

The teacher was taught to read and write in the mother tongue, and she has seen its value. She believes that reading and writing through the mother tongue is fundamental. According to Cummins (2001) reading and writing through the mother tongue is a strong predictor of the children's second language development.

The teacher mentioned that it was easy for her to read and write in her mother tongue, IsiZulu, because she was able to understand what the teacher was saying in class. In chapter 2 it was further discussed that learning to read and write is easier in a familiar language (Mackenzie, & Turbill, 1999). The teacher also revealed that her mother was able to assist with most of her schoolwork. Therefore, now that her Grade 3 learners are learning through their mother tongue just like she was taught in the past, she believes that by the end of the year many learners in the Grade 3 class will be able to read and write in IsiZulu as this is also specified in the Language of Education Policy (Act 27 of 1997). Hence, it will be easy for them to learn another language. Relatedly, Parent H said:

Extract 2

***Our children should read and write in their mother tongue for them to be able to build on the second language. I learned Afrikaans when I was working for the white people who were always speaking Afrikaans. It was***

***easy for me because I would always think in my mother tongue which enabled me to come up with Afrikaans words.***

The parents and the Grade 3 teacher were taught in a traditional-centered way. They believe that learning in your mother tongue prepares learners to be able to read and write in another language. This is evident in the teacher's classroom during a classroom observation. The extract below was constructed from the researcher's field notes.

### Extract 3

The researcher arrived in the Grade 3 class for observation as they were singing, the teacher says: *Asithandaze umthandazo wenkosi (Let's say the Lord's Prayer)*. Thereafter, the teacher gave the learners photocopies of a story from an English reader, *The Crow and the Pitcher*. Then she says: *Sizofunda indaba ka The Crow and the Pitcher, sizokwazi ukukhipha amabizo asetshenziwe endabeni (we will read the story The Crow and the Pitcher to identify nouns that have been used in the extract)*. The teacher reads the story while learners are silently reading from their photocopied sheets. She writes a few nouns on the board and asks learners to identify more nouns from the story, but instead they started making noise. One learner said "Maa'm asiwazi ama nouns" (we don't know nouns). The teacher says: *nouns are Ibizo/ Amabizo (igama lento ebonakalayo noma engabonakali (nouns are naming words)*. She further said: *Every person, place or thing is identified with a noun, without a noun we would not be able to communicate and understand each other. (Bonke abantu, izilwane kanye nendawo babizwa ngebizo, uma ibizo lingekho angeke sikwazi ukukhuluma zizwane)*. She asked learners: *yimaphi amagama angamabizo owaziyo (which words are used as common nouns?)* One learner responded: "Isitulo" The teacher repeats the word in their home language "Isitulo", and she translated the word into English "chair" The teacher also used pictures to show the learners common nouns like: *Incwadi* (book), *Itafula* (Table). The teacher then gave learners another chance to identify more common nouns from the extract. The learners worked quietly and some of them were able to finish the exercise on time. (2021)

The extract shows that the use of mother tongue is the key to communication and understanding in the first language classroom. The teacher uses the learners' own language to help them "transfer skills from the familiar to the unfamiliar one" Benson, (2004). For example, after explaining the meaning of the noun in the learners' home language, it became simple for the learners to understand the whole concept, "Noun" (Ibizo). Thus, it was easier for the learners to identify nouns from the text, and this was

displayed by the learners' ability to identify for nouns from their classroom. Learning to read and write in the Foundation Phase is vital because it creates opportunities for the teacher to maintain a positive learning atmosphere where learners feel comfortable to learn.

Willis & Willis, (2007) claim that it is impossible to avoid using a learner's first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms, especially with beginners. At this early stage, learners are still new to the second language, so they benefit from using their mother tongue. Many studies, as well as my participants, support the idea of mother tongue learning. However, this is not always what we see in schools. For example, although IsiZulu is meant to be the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase, some teachers and schools still do not fully implement this. This is what the teacher said:

Extract 4

***“In a Foundation Phase class, it is important to use IsiZulu as the main language of instruction because it helps young learners understand the basics. When we use IsiZulu, children feel more comfortable and can express themselves better, which builds their confidence. However, sometimes we are required to use English for certain subjects, and this can make it hard for the learners to keep up. IsiZulu is their first language, and when we use it, we see better engagement and understanding among the learners.”***

***Teacher Interview***

Extract 4 complements this idea by highlighting a teacher's firsthand experience with the advantages of using IsiZulu. The teacher explains that using IsiZulu allows learners to feel comfortable and confident, which improves their participation and understanding. However, the teacher also notes the challenge of having to switch to English for certain subjects, which can be difficult for learners. Both extracts support the notion that mother tongue instruction fosters better engagement and comprehension, especially for beginners.

The researcher observed that in Teacher A's class, learning in the mother tongue was easier and faster. These learners quickly understood the teacher's instructions and could easily identify verbs from the text. The researchers interpret this as evidence that teaching reading and writing in the learners' home language creates a strong foundation for literacy. For the Grade 3 teacher, using IsiZulu as the medium of instruction enables learners to engage more actively and build essential reading and writing skills, setting them up for continued success in later grades. Furthermore, Teacher from School C had something interesting to say:

Extract 5

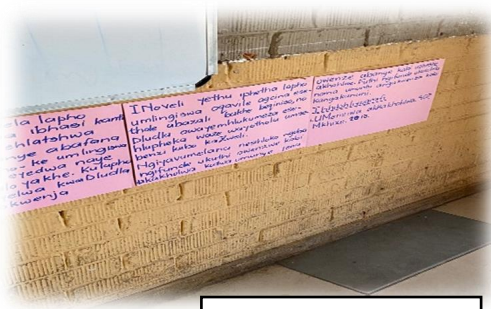
***I read IsiZulu stories to the learners and encourage them to bring different pictures from home. We use these pictures to decorate the classroom, creating a familiar and engaging environment. I also use these pictures to help explain parts of the stories we read, making connections to the learners' own lives. Additionally, I design exercises based on the pictures to reinforce their understanding.***

The teacher actively uses isiZulu stories as a teaching tool, reading them in the learners' mother tongue and encouraging students to bring pictures from home to decorate the classroom. He uses these pictures to make connections to the stories, helping learners visualize the content and engage more deeply with the material. He also provides exercises related to these pictures, reinforcing understanding through hands-on, familiar imagery.

This teaching approach not only enhances language proficiency in isiZulu but also fosters a strong cultural connection. By reading stories in isiZulu, the teacher introduces learners to elements of their cultural identity in a way that feels enjoyable and relatable. According to Ball (2009), learning in the mother tongue is essential for children to engage fully in their cultural contexts and participate meaningfully in their families and communities. As discussed in Chapter 2, the mother tongue plays a powerful role in highlighting cultural differences within a multiethnic society (Hechter, 1994) and gives children a sense of belonging. Both parents and Grade 3 teachers agree that learning through the mother tongue not only promotes language

development but also supports a child's cultural identity, allowing them to connect with the language and culture they know best.

**The following extract shows how Teacher C Use Isizulu to keep learners connected to their culture.**



Picture taken by researcher.



Picture taken by researcher.

The extract demonstrates how the teacher uses stories that are written in the learners' home language to expose them to their culture and to promote literacy in the classroom. This is supported by (Craig, Hull, Harggart & Crowder, 2001) when they assert that story reading is the main base for helping children to connect and experience prior learning knowledge with the larger world of text. The Department of Education (2001) further adds that stories help children to practice working out meaning through a context. The teacher gives his learners more opportunities to read in their Isizulu as it is requirement for the learners to learn to read and write in Grade 1 to 3 Department of Education (1997).

Another issue that emerged from the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in the early years of education is the development of cognitive/mental ability, which leads to the academic achievement of the learner. The teacher in this class teaches through a language that is familiar to the learners. That was reflected in the lesson presentations during the observation. When asked about the advantages of and disadvantages of learning through the mother tongue, the teacher said:



#### Extract 6

***Learners catch up faster than when one teaches through English as a medium of instruction and they can understand and do the activity. It makes them to participate and follow their capability to read and write through Isizulu.***

The teacher conceptualised the use of IsiZulu as the mother tongue in instruction as essential for helping learners build strong literacy skills in their first language. She believes it is easier to manage learners taught in IsiZulu because they respond positively and engage more effectively with the lessons. According to the teacher, using learners' first language not only enhances their literacy skills but also supports their mental development. She feels that mother tongue instruction in IsiZulu plays an active and beneficial role in second language learning and acquisition, providing a solid foundation that learners can build upon as they progress in their education.

Furthermore, the UNESCO committee of 1953, emphasised that learners learn fast in the mother tongue than an unfamiliar language. This is revealed in Themba's class where learners were noisy and finding it difficult to identify verbs from the text.

The literature discussed in chapter 2 also reveals that second language learners must first master strategies for negotiating meaning in print in the first language to acquire successful second language Collier, (1990). This is what one of the parents said when asked about the advantages and disadvantages of learning in mother tongue:

#### Extract 7

***When children do not understand the language that is used in the classroom, they are much more likely not to be successful in learning. Access to quality education really happens when the mother tongue is used as the language of learning. Our kids are improving but not satisfactory.***

From this response it is evidence that the parent is attentive to her children's education. She believes that the role of mother tongue is important in providing quality

education. She believes that that and exclusion of the L1 in the early stage makes learning difficult in the classroom. Thomas & Collier, (1997) emphasized that the educational success of learners is predicted by the amount of formal schooling they received in the L1. Thus, a strong foundation of the mother tongue can strengthen the learners' cognitive development and the second language development. When learners are deprived a strong foundation of the mother tongue, just as it is a current practice in South Africa where children learn in mother tongue for a period of 3 years while in the Foundation Phase, it makes other parents think that "the learners' achievement is not satisfactory". Another parent had this to say about mother tongue during early learning:

Extract 8

***I think our children should learn all subjects in Isizulu because they understand it better than any other language. Everything will make more sense to when being said in isizulu.***

In this extract, the parent expresses a strong preference for teaching children all subjects in IsiZulu, as it is the language they understand best. The parent believes that when lessons are taught in IsiZulu, everything becomes clearer and easier for the children to grasp. This is a common belief among those who support mother tongue education, as it allows learners to fully understand the content and engage in the learning process more effectively.

Research supports the importance of teaching children in their mother tongue, especially in the early stages of education. Studies show that learners are more successful when they are taught in a language they understand well. According to Heugh (2002), mother tongue instruction is essential for cognitive development and academic achievement, as it enables children to build a strong foundation for learning. By understanding concepts in their first language, learners are better able to transfer these skills to a second language later.

Furthermore, using IsiZulu as the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase has been shown to enhance comprehension and participation. Alexander (2005) emphasizes that when children learn in their home language, they are more likely to

excel in school, as it helps them to think critically and develop literacy skills that are transferable to other languages, including English.

Parent L and Parent O views:

Extract 9

***It is easier for us to help our children with schoolwork when it is in IsiZulu. This is because we understand the language and we can be able to guide our children more effectively.***

This point highlights one of the key advantages of teaching children in their mother tongue: it allows parents to be more involved in their children's education. When children are taught in a language their parents understand, they can easily support their learning at home. This involvement is crucial for a child's academic success, as parental support helps reinforce the lessons taught in school.

Research supports the idea that using a mother tongue, like IsiZulu, in education strengthens the home school connection. According to Heugh (2002), when children are taught in a language they understand, parents can better support their children's learning, leading to improved academic outcomes. On the other hand, if children are taught in a language the parents do not understand, like English, it can create barriers to parental involvement. Alexander (2005) also notes that mother tongue instruction helps bridge the gap between home and school, enabling parents to become active participants in their child's education.

Extract 9

***I feel good about reading and writing in isiZulu. I understand everything.***

The learner expressed feeling positive about reading and writing in IsiZulu, stating that he understands everything when lessons are taught in this language. This reflects the benefit of learning in the mother tongue, as it allows the learner to fully grasp the material and feel confident in their learning.

Research shows that when learners are taught in their mother tongue, they are more likely to understand the content and engage actively in the classroom. According to Heugh (2002), teaching in the mother tongue, especially in the early grades, helps learners build a strong foundation for literacy. It also enables them to better understand complex concepts because they can relate the new information to their daily life and language experiences. Alexander (2005) also supports the idea that learning in a familiar language like IsiZulu promotes a sense of security and confidence in learners. When children learn in a language they know well, they are not distracted by language barriers and can focus on understanding the lessons. This feeling of understanding everything, as expressed by the learners, is a sign that the use of IsiZulu is helping them succeed academically.

Extract 11

***I have a story that I wrote in Isizulu about my family and shared it with them and my friends. They were very proud of me for being able to write in Isizulu.***

In this extract, the learner shares a story they wrote in IsiZulu about their family and describes how proud their friends and family were of them for being able to write in IsiZulu. This response shows how the use of IsiZulu can boost a learner's self-confidence and create a sense of pride in their cultural identity. Writing in their mother tongue, IsiZulu, allows the learner to express themselves more easily and meaningfully. It also gives them a sense of accomplishment, as reflected in the pride felt by both the learner and their peers. According to Ball (2009), using a learner's mother tongue in education helps reinforce cultural identity and boosts self-esteem. When learners are able to write and speak in their native language, they are more likely to feel proud of their abilities and develop a positive attitude toward learning.

Additionally, as mentioned by Heugh (2002), mother tongue education enhances cognitive development because learners can fully understand and express their ideas without being distracted by language barriers. In this case, the learner was able to write in IsiZulu about something personal, which allowed for deeper expression and stronger engagement with the learning process.

Furthermore, Alexander (2005) highlights that when learners use their home language, it fosters a sense of belonging, which can positively affect their motivation and academic success. The learner's experience of sharing their story in IsiZulu and receiving positive feedback shows how mother tongue instruction can build confidence and pride, both academically and culturally.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In this study, the researcher presented and analysed data to examine the benefits of teaching and learning in IsiZulu for early literacy development among mother tongue speakers. The analysis focused on three main themes: the impact of IsiZulu on comprehension, how it fosters a positive attitude towards school, and the advantages of a bilingual approach. The findings show that learning in IsiZulu enhances understanding of curriculum content, builds learner confidence, and supports a successful transition to English through a bilingual approach.

In conclusion, the study confirms that IsiZulu plays a vital role in early literacy development, promoting better comprehension and positive engagement with learning. The next chapter will look into discussions, interpreting these findings in the context of existing literature and exploring their broader implications for teaching practices.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 and discusses the significance of teaching and learning in IsiZulu for early literacy development. By examining the data in the light of existing literature, this chapter aims to show how mother-tongue instruction supports comprehension, confidence, and engagement in learning. Additionally, we explore key areas such as learners' age, social backgrounds, parental support, teacher and learner communication, and how language policies affect literacy development. This chapter also highlights the implications of these findings for classroom practice and suggests ways to strengthen IsiZulu instruction for improved literacy skills in reading and writing.

### **5.2 Learners age**

The data shows that learners in the Foundation Phase, typically between ages 7 and 9, benefit greatly from instruction in their mother tongue, IsiZulu. At this young age, children are still developing their cognitive and language skills, making it essential to teach them in a language they understand well. According to Cummins (2000), early education in a familiar language allows young learners to grasp foundational concepts without language barriers, creating a strong base for future learning.

#### **5.2.1 Learners' social backgrounds**

Most learners in this study come from communities where IsiZulu is spoken at home, so using IsiZulu in the classroom connects school learning with their daily lives. As Heugh (2002) explains, learners bring their cultural and linguistic knowledge from home, which helps them better understand lessons when taught in a familiar language. By aligning classroom instruction with learners' social backgrounds, teachers can help them feel more connected to their education.

### **5.3 Parental Support for Mother-Tongue Instruction**

This chapter shows that parents' support for mother tongue instruction justifies its use in the Foundation Phase. In his article on *The Dilemma of the Mother Tongue: Prospects for Bilingual Education in South Africa* (2010) Felix Banda warns that

government's language policies that seek to promote the addition of mother tongue as an official language of instruction alongside English are unlikely to succeed if role models, learners and their parents see little utility in languages other than English. Banda (2010) notes the general pessimistic outlook for mother tongue instruction in education policy, stems from the lack of preference and support for mother tongue instructions by stakeholders including parents. On the contrary, despite diverse educational and professional backgrounds, the parents interviewed also expressed immense support and conviction in mother tongue instruction. Furthermore, some parents reported that the only academic support they could offer to learners was in their mother tongue, since they are primarily fluent in their home languages.

In an article titled "*Why Involving parents Makes Sense in Mother Tongue Instruction*" Maina (2016) found that an innovative program in Ugandan schools is showing how parental involvement in mother tongue and early childhood education strengthens primary outcomes for children and puts parents at the heart of their children's education. The study also found that emphasizing mother tongue instruction also strengthened ties and collaboration between teachers and parents. In summary, the parents interviewed in this study highlighted the everyday social and cultural exposure of learners to their mother tongue to justify the use of mother tongue instruction.

#### **5.4 Parental involvement**

In summary, most parents interviewed indicated that they actively engage in their children's schoolwork in various ways, especially when helping with homework and assessments. This involvement shows that parents feel confident supporting their children in subjects that use a language they understand well, like IsiZulu. This supports the idea that when parents and children share a language of instruction, it strengthens both learning and communication at home (Makalela, 2021; Mbedzi & Mthombeni, 2023). However, a notable contradiction emerged in the responses. Although some homework assignments are given in English, many parents still prefer to support their children in IsiZulu. Teacher B highlighted that parents believe mother-tongue instruction is more effective because their children show better comprehension when using their home language. This preference for mother-tongue support aligns with findings in other research, which show that mother-tongue education is often more accessible and meaningful for both children and their families (Makalela, 2021).

These insights suggest that, while English may be the language of homework, parents' choice to use IsiZulu reinforces its role in helping children understand and complete their assignments confidently. The findings indicate that parents' involvement is most effective when the language used aligns with the language spoken at home, which further supports the case for mother tongue education in early literacy development.

### **5.5 Parents' literacy**

The development of children's literacy is largely informed by and dependent on their parents' literacy levels and language competencies. Research suggests that parents' abilities in both the home language and the language of instruction used at school are crucial for effective involvement in their children's schoolwork (Makalela, 2022). For parents to actively support learning, they need some literacy and language skills in either the home language or the school's language of instruction (Ngwenya, 2021). However, 5% of the parents interviewed had limited language competencies, as they reported being most comfortable with their home languages. Interestingly, even without reading materials in their home languages, many parents showed confidence in communicating and reading in their mother tongue.

Furthermore, more than 50% of the parents interviewed claimed that they can read and write in their home languages, which is a core skill in developing Foundation Phase learners' literacies and empowering their cognitive development. Moreover, the middle-class parents that participated in this study had professional careers and are generally literate and capable to communicate, read and write in their home languages as well as in English and Afrikaans. Despite these parents' varying levels of literacy, what they had commonly observed is a strong willingness and desire in their children to be taught in their mother tongue.

### **5.6 COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM: Teachers and Learners' Perspectives.**

Effective communication is vital in a classroom setting. In the classrooms observed, learners used their mother-tongue as a tool to socialize, communicate and share information. In a sense, this use of mother tongue communication vividly illustrates that mother tongue falls within Lev Vygotsky's notion of "social learning" in the classroom. The general responses from the teachers also revealed that they can



communicate effectively when they communicate in their mother tongue. This study argues that using mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase also mitigates communication barriers.

### **5.7 Teachers' language backgrounds**

The study also seeks to relate teachers' language backgrounds and their support for mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase. The teachers interviewed are non-English home language speakers. However, this observation does not imply that these teachers are not properly capable and qualified to teach learners in the official language of instruction, hence their support for mother tongue instruction. It was evident during observations that understanding their own language backgrounds also enables the teachers to develop critical reflections on the issue of language in the Foundation Phase. It was further evident that using situational analysis, teachers can adjust to the language competencies of the learners.

### **5.8 Teachers' communication with learners in the classroom**

The teachers interviewed expressed that they are expected to comply with the official language of communication in the classroom, which is English. In contrast, Teacher A observed that learners' proficiency in English is not good and further showed that despite her learners not being allowed to use their mother tongue code switching is sometimes beneficial. This is seen in how the teacher describes the language through which learners communicate and collaborate in the classroom, which is isiZulu/English.

In addition, Teacher B felt that utilizing mother tongue instruction enables learners to understand the content that they must process and engage. In summary, the teachers indicated that effective communication is usually facilitated through the learners' mother tongue. Teacher C asserted that comprehension and participation is usually higher when the learners are addressed in their mother tongue. Similarly, it can be argued that teaching and learning processes should take place in the mother tongue because it is a bridge between the child and world, and it allows the child to relate with information in the classroom space (Awopetu, 2016).

## **5.9 Learners' communication:**

This chapter looks at how using the mother tongue, IsiZulu, helps make teaching and learning easier for young students. Even though the formal curriculum is presented to learners in English, the researcher noticed that students often speak IsiZulu with each other in the classroom. The teacher also mentioned that learners feel more comfortable and confident when talking to her in IsiZulu.

This shows that students benefit from using a language they know well. The researcher argues that a good classroom communication model should let students express themselves confidently in a language they understand easily. When students can use a familiar language, like IsiZulu, they can participate better and feel more connected in class (Makalela, 2021).

## **5.10 Language and Literacy Development Policies**

The overarching purpose of this theme is to investigate how the selected school's language and literacy development policies prioritize mother tongue instruction in the classroom. In addition, this theme sought to understand the implementation of departmental language policies to facilitate mother tongue instruction. Furthermore, it will incorporate the dominant assumptions of the Language in Education Policy of South Africa (1997) to emphasize the importance of mother tongue instruction which is often eclipsed by the official language of instruction in most schools across South Africa. Unfortunately, most of the schools observed did not have an existing language and literacy development policy established within the school. On the other hand, schools that had a language policy framework prioritized English as a medium of instruction.

Sookrajh (2009) states that the intention of the Language-in-Education-Policy of 1997 was to promote all 11 official languages. In addition, the policy justifies the right for learners to choose their own medium of instruction. However, Sookrajh (2009) also notes that the implementation of this policy has been fraught with challenges and discrepancies.

According to Sindane (2015) the positive outcomes of a mother tongue instruction policy depend on people's attitudes towards the first language and English second

language. The prioritization of mother tongue instruction is arguably determined by the establishment and implementation of inclusive language and literacy policies in schools. In their research on *Language Policies and Practices in Tanzania and South Africa: Problems and Challenges* (2004), Birgit Brock-Utne and Halla (2004) reported that whatever official policies may be, the teachers in the classroom will use whatever language they and their students feel most comfortable with.

### **5.11 Summaries of language policies in each school in relation to mother tongue instruction**

According to Teacher A, the language policy of school A clearly stipulates that English must be always used. While the use of English is expected in the schools observed, Stephen Taylor and Marisa Von Fintel (2016) found that mother tongue in the early grades significantly improves English acquisition. In line with the overarching emphasis contained in this project, it can be argued that this exposes learners to communication and literacy barriers because it assumes that all learners have an equal language competency in English. In addition, Teacher B also revealed that the policy always emphasizes the use of English. The teachers also pointed out obvious discrepancies between these policies and their implications on their pedagogical practices. They emphasized that these language policies seem to impose linguistic indoctrination on learners, rather than nurturing their expression and academic development in a language of their choice.

### **5.12 Implications of Mother-Tongue Instruction in the Classroom**

This theme explores how learners develop reading skills more effectively when engaging with materials in isiZulu. Based on learners' responses, we see how their reading, writing, and speaking skills in the Foundation Phase improve when they work in their mother tongue. Additionally, this theme highlights how teachers can explain new ideas more effectively in isiZulu and how learners process information better when taught in their mother tongue.

#### **(a) Learners' Reading Skills in Their Mother Tongue**

Nearly 90% of learners shared that they enjoy reading in class, but most reading materials are in English, making it difficult for them to understand or pronounce many

words. This language gap affects their ability to develop literacy skills. When asked if they understand their English textbooks, over 70% of learners said they “sometimes” understand. However, they feel much more confident and capable when reading in isiZulu, their home language.

Teachers observed that learners struggle with English reading tasks, which affects their confidence. Using isiZulu allows learners to grasp new concepts better and to enjoy reading, which builds a stronger foundation for literacy. This approach also bridges the gap between learners’ language at home and at school, allowing for smoother learning and improved comprehension. Teachers found that learners’ understanding of reading content and confidence levels increased when they could first learn to read in isiZulu before gradually being introduced to English.

### **(b) Impact of mother tongue instruction on learners’ writing skills**

Although reading and writing skills are related, they often require different language competencies. In other words, a learner’s ability to read does not determine their ability to write meaningfully. On the other hand, this study seeks to present the hypothesis that incorporating writing exercises in the learners’ home language would enable them to read and write meaningfully. Parents, teachers, and learners unanimously agree that the learners’ home language should be a starting point to develop their literacy skills, which include their writing skills. In a project titled *A Case for Mother Tongue Education* (2012), Desai observed Grade 4 learners’ results in a narrative task written in both the learners’ mother tongue and English. It was found that learners performed significantly better in the isiXhosa version of the task.

## **5.13 Media, Visual Literacy and Mother Tongue Instruction**

In his analysis of Flemish learners’ exposure to English language media Peters (2018) has shown that media influenced learners’ vocabulary and knowledge development. Using the pattern of Peter’s (2018) observations, this theme interrogates Foundation Phase learners’ exposure to mother tongue content through the daily visual stimulus of TV programmes. It builds on the hypothesis that Foundation Phase learners’

preference of a certain medium of instruction may be shaped by their frequent exposure to the language on their favorite TV programmes. During the interviews conducted, it was evident that a certain level of the learners' preference for mother tongue instruction stems from their exposure to television programmes that prominently feature their mother tongue or certain dialects or close variations of their mother tongue.

Learner A explained that he watches 'Uzalo' and Generations: The Legacy. While the first telenovela is distinctly scripted in isiZulu and features other African languages, the second popular soap opera is a confluence of multilingual backgrounds. In a sense, these learners perceive and relate with the outside world widely broadcasted on television programmes through their mother tongue or close variations of it. In addition, the learners also indicated the need for the creation of children's entertainment programmes such as TV cartoon stories in their own languages.

Furthermore, the lack of sufficient exposure to magazines, books and newspaper stories and cartoons which are written in English may explain the learners' preference for mother tongue instruction. Foundation Phase learners rely on stories and accessible forms of media to understand the world and to elicit their interest in learning. In addition, popular folkloric stories that are told in these learners' homes are narrated in isiZulu, by parents who use the traditional oral tradition of storytelling. In contrast, other learners indicated that they watch multilingual television programmes. While this study does not seek to conclusively argue that television programmes and media plays a role in language, it posits that learners' exposure to content presented in their mother tongue make them appreciate the general use of mother tongue over other languages. Furthermore, learners may potentially learn new words and understand the use of certain words through television programmes.

#### **5.14 Conclusion**

This chapter explored key findings on the impact of mother tongue instruction, including the benefits of using isiZulu for early literacy, the importance of parental support, and the role of teacher learner communication. These findings highlight how isiZulu instruction fosters better understanding, confidence, and engagement among young learners, though challenges remain due to limited resources and policies

favoring English. The next chapter, Chapter 6, will present the conclusions and recommendations based on these findings.

## **Chapter 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This final chapter brings the study to a close by summarizing the key literature, research findings, limitations, and offering recommendations for practical application and future research.

### **6.2 Summary and research findings**

This study investigated the impact of teaching in the mother tongue, isiZulu, for early literacy development among young learners in South African schools. The research showed that using isiZulu as the language of instruction in the Foundation Phase helps children understand their lessons better and feel more connected to their cultural background. Learners could follow instructions more easily and performed better on literacy tasks, demonstrating a clear benefit for using their home language in the classroom. These findings align with the Language in Education Policy (1997), which promotes mother tongue instruction to foster equality and quality in education.

Parental support also played a major role in this study, as many parents expressed confidence in helping their children learn in isiZulu, despite challenges with English resources. Additionally, this study supports findings from other research showing that children tend to be more engaged and confident when they learn in a familiar language.

### **6.3 Limitations of the hypothesis**

While this study shows that using isiZulu as the language of instruction helps learners improve their reading and writing skills, there are some limitations. First, the study mainly focused on learners in the Foundation Phase, so it didn't track how these learners perform in later grades when English becomes the primary language of instruction. Additionally, because this study took place in a specific area where isiZulu is commonly spoken, it may not fully apply to areas with different language backgrounds or to schools with resources that do not support mother-tongue instruction. Finally, many teachers and parents feel pressured to prioritize English due to its importance for future career opportunities, which could limit the support for implementing mother-tongue education in all subjects.

## 6.4 Recommendations

### 6.4.1 Recommendations for future practice

To improve mother tongue instruction and literacy development, the Department of Education and schools can consider the following:

- **Strengthen Policy Implementation:** Although South Africa's Language in Education Policy (1997) is clear on promoting mother tongue instruction, implementation remains weak in many schools. Clear guidelines and active support from the Department of Education are essential to ensure schools adhere to policy recommendations.
- **Recruit Language-Trained Teachers:** To support mother tongue instruction, schools should prioritize recruiting teachers trained in the primary languages spoken by students. This includes IsiZulu, Sesotho, and other African languages. This approach could help make classrooms more inclusive and supportive for young learners.
- **Effective Lesson Planning:** Teachers should consider the language needs of their students when planning lessons. For example, they can use code-switching or include familiar vernacular terms to help students understand complex ideas. This approach can make learning more accessible and meaningful, particularly in early grades.

### 6.4.2 Recommendation for future research

Future research should explore ways to implement mother tongue instruction across core subjects, such as mathematics, science, and commerce, and examine how these approaches affect learning outcomes. Additional research on developing practical language policies for diverse classrooms could also provide insights into effective ways to balance multilingual needs with quality education.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study achieved its objective of examining the benefits of mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase. Findings suggest that using learners' mother tongue in the classroom can significantly support their literacy and overall understanding. Given South Africa's multilingual landscape, relying solely on English in schools may limit students' potential. Reconsidering language policies to



include mother tongue instruction can contribute to a more inclusive and effective education system.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Letter to the Principal

#### The School Principal

My name is Marcia Khumalo. I am a master's student in African languages at the University of South Africa (student number 61401560). One of the requirements in my course is that I conduct a research project in a school setting. The topic of my research is: A study of advantages in mother tongue teaching for early literacy development. The process of the research includes interviews with selected learners and teachers.

Participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the project at any time. Participants will remain anonymous in any reporting on the project. Please be assured that no one will be harmed during the research.

After the project is completed, I will be happy to share the findings with you.

Yours sincerely

M Khumalo                      Email: [marciakhumaloo@gmail.com](mailto:marciakhumaloo@gmail.com) Cell phone 0761336678

Supervisor                      Dr S Mandubu      Email: [mandus@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mandus@unisa.ac.za)      0124296976

I hereby confirm that I understand that Marcia Khumalo is doing research on the above-mentioned topic. I hereby give her permission to conduct the above-mentioned research at this school.

-----

-----

**Signature of Principal**

**Date**

## Appendix 2: Consent form

### The Class Teacher

My name is Marcia Khumalo. I am a master's student in African languages at the University of South Africa (student number 61401560). One of the requirements in my course is that I conduct a research project in a school setting. The topic of my research is: A study of advantages in mother tongue teaching for early literacy development. The process of the research includes interviews with selected learners and teachers.

Participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the project at any time. Participants will remain anonymous in any reporting on the project. Please be assured that no one will be harmed during the research.

After the project is completed, I will be happy to share the findings with you.

Yours sincerely

M Khumalo                      Email: [marciakhumaloo@gmail.com](mailto:marciakhumaloo@gmail.com) Cell phone 0761336678

Supervisor                      Dr S Mandubu      Email: [mandus@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mandus@unisa.ac.za) 0124296976

I hereby confirm that I understand that Marcia Khumalo is doing research on the above-mentioned topic. I hereby give my consent to participate in the above-mentioned research.

-----

**Signature of Teacher**

-----

**Date**

### Appendix 3: INFORMATION AND CONSENT FOR RESEARCH

#### The Parent/Guardian

My name is Marcia Khumalo. I am a master's student in African languages at the University of South Africa (student number 61401560). One of the requirements in my course is that I conduct a research project in a school setting. The topic of my research is: A study of advantages in mother tongue teaching for early literacy development. The process of the research includes interviews with selected learners and teachers.

I would like to ask your consent for (name of child) ----- . Your child's participation is voluntary, and he/ she can withdraw from the project at any time. Your child will remain anonymous in any reporting on the project. Please be assured that no one will be harmed during the research.

After the project is completed, I will be happy to share the findings with you.

Yours sincerely

M Khumalo            Email: [marciakhumaloo@gmail.com](mailto:marciakhumaloo@gmail.com) Cell phone 0761336678

Supervisor            Dr S Mandubu    Email: [mandus@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mandus@unisa.ac.za)    0124296976

I hereby confirm that I understand that Marcia Khumalo is doing research on the above-mentioned topic. I hereby give permission for my son/ daughter ----- to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

-----  
**of Parent/ guardian**

-----**Signature**  
**Date**

#### **Appendix 4: Interview Schedule (learners)**

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. Who do you live with?
4. What do your parents do?
5. What languages do you speak, read, and write?
6. When did you learn these languages?
7. Where did you learn these languages?
8. When do you speak English?
9. When do you use other languages?
10. When you read your English textbook in class do you understand?
11. Does anyone help you at home when you read?
12. What language do you prefer the teacher to use when teaching in class?
13. What language do you speak at home?
14. What music do you listen to at home?
15. What television programmes do you watch?
16. What languages are these programmes in apart from English?
17. Do you have magazines, books, and newspapers in your home?
18. What language are these magazines, books, and newspapers?
19. What do you enjoy reading at school?

## **Appendix 5: Interview Schedule (Teachers)**

1. Apart from your mother tongue, what other languages are you fluent in?
2. When do you use these languages?
3. What languages do the learners use when interacting with you?
4. How does mother tongue medium of instruction contribute towards reading and writing in your classroom?
5. What is the school policy in relation to language teaching?
6. How do You accommodate learners who are not Isizulu speakers in your classroom?
7. Do you think home language can be utilized to strengthen literacy in the classroom?
8. What are your views on mother tongue instruction?
9. What are your views of English as a medium of instruction?
10. Which medium of instruction do you prefer? Why?



## **Appendix 6: Questionnaire for parents**

1. Where do you live?
2. Which school is your child attending?
3. Are you employed?
4. What language do you speak at home?
5. Do you have any reading material in that language?
6. Can you write in the language you speak at home?
7. Can you read and write in the language you speak?
8. Why is it important to use mother tongue as a medium of instruction in Grade 3?
9. Do you assist your child with homework?
10. Which language do you use when assisting your child with schoolwork?
11. How do you encourage your child to use his/ her mother tongue at home?
12. From your point of view, which language has a positive impact on your child's performance?

## Appendix 7: Observation Form

Date-----

Grade-----

Teacher's name-----

Lesson topic: -----

1. Introduction of lesson:
2. Teacher's use of language:
3. Learners' responses during interaction:
4. Learning activities given by the teacher:
  - Lower order questions:
  - Middle order questions:
  - Higher order questions
5. The language that learners use when interacting to each other:
6. Teacher's way of follow up e.g. during group work or individual work:
7. Teacher's motivation strategies e.g.
  - Reading
  - Homework
  - Story telling

Teacher's signature:

Observer's signature:

## The Crow and the Pitcher



Read the story.

One hot, dry day, a crow looked for water. He found a pitcher of water. He tried to drink it, but the top was too narrow. He could not fit his beak in the small

opening. There was no way to drink the water.

He turned one way and then the other. He moved from side to side. His beak was just too big.

He was so thirsty. He stopped and rested. As he sat, he noticed a pile of pebbles. He had an idea.

Using his large beak, he picked up the small stones one at a time. He dropped each into the pitcher. As they filled the jug, the water began to rise.

Hot and tired, he continued placing the tiny rocks into the container. Finally, the water was close to the top. The clever crow drank and drank.



Source: Story book  
(A Big Book of Little Stories)

## Appendix 9: Ethical Clearance



### COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

01 February 2019

Dear M. Z Khumalo

NHREC Registration # : Rec-  
240816-052

CREC Reference # : 2019-CHS-  
0235

Student No : 61401560

**Decision:**  
**Ethics Approval from 01 February**  
**2018 to 31 January 2021**

**Researcher(s):** M. Z Khumalo

**Supervisor(s):** Dr Mandubu Siziwe  
Department of African Languages

**A study of advantages in IsiZulu/ Sesotho teaching and learning for early literacy development of mother tongue speakers**

**Qualifications Applied:** Masters

College of Human Science ethics committee hereby acknowledge your application for Research Ethics Certificate; approval is granted for three years on condition that the researcher should submit annual progress report.

The Chair of College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee reviewed the **Medium risk application** on the 29 January 2019 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment. The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the Department of Psychology Ethics Review Committee.



3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**31 January 2021**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **2019-CHS-0235** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,

Signature : 

Dr Suryakanthie Chetty  
Deputy Chair : CREC  
E-mail: chetts@unisa.ac.za  
Tel: (012) 429-6267

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Professor A Phillips  
Executive Dean : CHS  
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