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Sepedi home language for Khelobedu-L1 learners: Whose home language is it? A language dilemma

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Learners whose languages were not fortunate enough to be elevated to official status (those which can be used as languages of learning and teaching [LoLTs]) are compelled to take one of the official languages as a 'home language.' In most cases, what is taught as a home language in South African schools is totally different from what learners speak at home. In such a case, learners may be at a disadvantage as they will be taught, assessed as native speakers and expected to demonstrate linguistic abilities of native speakers. This study was envisaged to address this language dilemma in the context of Khelobedu-L1 learners in Bolobedu South. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with a case study design. Data were gathered through questionnaires and focus group interviews with 60 learners from the two selected high schools in Bolobedu South. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

Contribution: The study found that Sepedi is not a home language to Khelobedu-L1 learners, but imposed. The implications of this imposition are discussed in detail in this research article.

Keywords: Sepedi; Khelobedu; home language; imposition; terminology.

Introduction

Background and rationale

The *Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement* (CAPS) states that any of the official languages can be used as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in South African schools (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2023). These languages include Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenḓa, Xitsonga, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, English and Afrikaans. The CAPS further states that the learners are to learn one of the aforementioned languages as home language (HL) and another as a first additional language (FAL). The issue of using official languages as LoLTs is also propagated by the *South African Language in Education Policy's* (LiEP) position which states that learners in the Foundation Phase (FP) in South Africa should be exposed to at least one official language as a LoLT. Since the South African Constitution does not make room for dialects, language issues face dialect-speaking learners, as observed by researchers such as Ramothwala, Mandende and Cekiso (2022) and Majola and Cekiso (2023). These researchers argue that learners who speak dialects at home are at a disadvantage because what is said to be their 'home language' at school is different from the language they actually speak at home. Majola and Cekiso (2023) submit that IsiBhaca-L1 learners are caught between a rock and a hard place. They submit that either IsiZulu or IsiXhosa is being imposed on the Baca-L1 learners as HL, neither of which they actually speak at home. They argue that this is not fair for IsiBhaca-L1 learners because they are expected to demonstrate the same language ability as native Xhosa HL learners who speak IsiXhosa at home and with friends.

A similar case is made by Ramothwala and colleagues (2021), who conducted a case study on Khelobedu-L1 learners. They found that Khelobedu-L1 learners are taught Sepedi as an HL. These findings are supported by Ramothwala and colleagues (2022), who state that Sepedi is provided as a LoLT in primary schools in Bolobedu South from Grades R to 3 and as an HL for Khelobedu-L1 learners in Grade 4 and higher. Similar to IsiBhaca-L1 learners, Khelobedu-L1 learners are expected to demonstrate the same language ability as native Sepedi learners who speak Sepedi at home. Ramothwala, Mandende and Cekiso (2024) argue that this is not fair for Khelobedu-L1 learners in Bolobedu South as they grow up speaking Khelobedu until they enrol in school, where they learn in Sepedi. Apart from lack of exposure to Sepedi, Ramothwala and colleagues (2024) cite linguistic mismatches that exist between Khelobedu and Sepedi as one of the factors contributing to this unfairness. For example, a Khelobedu-L1 learner is taught at

home that a frog is *khedula*, but when they get to school they learn that a frog is *segwagwa*. Other examples include, but are not limited to: *khofeni*, which means face in English, is *sefahlego* in Sepedi; *zikunwani*, which means toes in English, is *menwana ya maoto* in Sepedi; *lekholobidha*, which means lizard, is *moritagane* in Sepedi and so on. Given the above examples, the vocabulary of the two languages will subsequently conflict and end up complicating the lives of Khelobedu-L1 learners. Because of these differences, Khelobedu-L1 learners are unlikely to hit the ground running, as they do not start on an even playing ground with Sepedi-L1 learners.

From a constitutional point of view in South Africa, Ramothwala and colleagues (2022) and Majola and Cekiso (2023) submit that Khelobedu-L1 and IsiBhca-L1 learners and other learners who speak dialects are deprived of the constitutional right other learners are enjoying, namely that of being taught in their HL. The author of this article argues that the term 'home language' is problematic in Basic Education, given that there are learners who come from dialectal backgrounds, and should therefore be clarified. The bone of contention is that not all learners who are said to be learning a HL in Basic Education actually speak those languages at home. In the case of IsiBhaca and Khelobedu, IsiZulu or IsiXhosa and Sepedi are being imposed on the learners as HL. The purpose of this study is to flag the issue of HL imposition and how it affects dialect-speaking learners on whom these official languages are imposed as HL.

If studies of this nature are not conducted, dialect-speaking learners upon whom official languages are imposed as their HL will continue to suffer in silence. They will continue to be treated and assessed as though they are native speakers of these official languages, while they are not. This may lead to underachievement, as the learners would be taught and assessed in a language they have little or no competency in. When they underperform, they may be stereotyped as apathetic or unintelligent, as warned by Allsop (2010). This can result in learners having low self-esteem, as observed by Evans and Nthulwana (2018). Evans and Nthulwana (2018) note that the learners' self-esteem can fade whenever they struggle to express themselves in the language of instruction. These struggles can be exacerbated by conceptions such as 'no one fails HL'. In a situation where a learner fails a HL, they repeat a grade according to the DBE pass requirements. The rationale behind this is that no learner should fail a HL because it is supposed to be their bread and butter. Unfortunately for dialect-speaking learners, it is a different ball game.

Beyond pedagogical ramifications, the problem under discussion can even have cultural ramifications. The identity of the native speakers can be imposed upon the dialect-speaking learners because they are learning in the language of other people. The Khelobedu-L1 learners might put little value on their own culture, and instead hunger for that of the imposed colonising group, Bapedi. This is well captured by Wa Thiongo (1986). In his book titled *Decolonising the Mind*, Wa Thiongo argues that imperialism has made people disregard their languages and created the impression that their languages are not taking them to the 'Promised Land'. Sadly, this makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves, for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own.

Given that there are learners who do not speak the official languages at home and who have poor command of the official languages, which put them at a disadvantage, the study asks, 'why are Khelobedu-L1 learners not taught Sepedi as a FAL, as is the case with English and Afrikaans, English FAL and Afrikaans FAL?' The author's view is that if Khelobedu-L1 learners are taught Sepedi at a level of first additional, they would excel in Sepedi.

Problem statement

Learners whose languages were not fortunate enough to be elevated to official status (i.e. those which can be used as LoLTs) are compelled to take one of the official languages as a HL. This puts a vast majority of learners at a disadvantage, as their linguistic abilities are nowhere near those of the first-language speakers. What is even worse is that these learners are expected to pass at 40%. Teaching and assessing second-language speakers at first language speakers' level, where they are expected to pass at 40%, is unfair. This, without a doubt, advantages those who actually speak these languages at their homes such as Bapedi, while disadvantaging those for whom these official languages could be their second or third languages. This is tantamount to linguistic imperialism, which is defined by Galloway and Rose (2015:255) as 'discrimination based on language that unfairly treats certain linguistic communities, or unfairly advantages some languages over others.' Majola and Cekiso (2023) argue that imposing IsiZulu or IsiXhosa on learners who speak IsiBhaca at home is unfair as they have little competence in these languages.

Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework serves as the structure and support for the study's rationale, problem statement and purpose. This study employed social justice theory as the foundational basis for advancing the argument on mother-tongue education. This theory is discussed in detail in the following subsection.

Social justice

Social justice (SJ) was deemed the relevant theory to anchor this study because the problem in this study is one of social justice. Musara, Grant and Vorster (2021) describe SJ as one of the inclusive education models. The inclusion of this theory in this study was necessitated by the Constitution of South Africa and, in particular, phrases such as 'equal and just education,' 'education for all' and 'inclusive education'. Social justice is defined by Mazzoleni and colleagues (2015:1)

as 'giving each due.' In the context of this study, SJ means that knowledge is provided to the learners in their L1, which will make the curriculum more accessible to them. This will provide epistemic access and allow for incorporating the learners' world.

In order to strengthen the study's argument, the author of this article found relevance in drawing on the theory of social justice by John Rawls (1971). Rawls' theory posits that every individual should have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with similar liberties for others. These include freedom of speech, the right to vote and the right to hold public office. This principle champions a society where everyone starts on an even playing field regarding their rights. Although Rawls's theory was not specifically focused on education, it remains highly relevant. When one looks at the education system of South Africa, one would realise that learners do not start on an even playing field as far as the language of instruction is concerned. Some learners start off school in a language they use at their homes, such as Bapedi, while other groups such as Balobedu, Bapulana and Bahananwa, to name a few, start school in an entirely different language, and this put them at a disadvantage, as per the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) findings in recent years. Rawls's theory is used to argue for epistemological access denied to the learners whose languages have been relegated to the lower echelons of society.

The author also found relevance in using this theory because it speaks to the promise made by the Department of Education in 1996 to ensure that all learners enjoy the right to quality education, free from discrimination and prejudice. Sadly, studies conducted by Khweyane (2014) and Majola, Ditsele and Cekiso (2019) have shown that there are still learners who are not enjoying the linguistic freedom of being taught in their languages, for example, in Sepulana or isiBhaca. The Sepulana learners were taught in Sepedi, while isiBhaca learners were taught in either IsiXhosa or IsiZulu. In both cases, the researchers reported that the learners had little competence in these languages used as a medium of instruction (MoI). In simple terms, these learners were given knowledge in their second or third languages, as opposed to their first language (L1), whereas their counterparts were given knowledge in their L1. This state of affairs cannot be regarded as socially just because some learners and languages are still marginalised. Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele (2022) describe this as 'epistemic injustice,' writing that:

> [*T*]he lack of opportunity to learn in your chosen language is an epistemic injustice, and it can destroy one's ability to be recognised as a knower with long-term effects on social academic identities. (p. 5)

For example, a learner may know an answer but not be able to give it in the accepted language, so the learner's ability to be recognised as a competent knower is taken away, leading to self-silencing. Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele (2022) further warn that this epistemic injustice may open learners to long-term trajectories of economic and sociopolitical exclusion and disadvantage, along with reduced confidence in their epistemic worth.

Literature review

This section starts off by giving a brief historical background pertaining to language standardisation in South Africa. This will explain how standardisation was undertaken and how certain dialects or languages came to be absorbed under the already codified dialects. The standardisation issue is with reference to Sepedi, which is the language in question. It is beyond the scope of this article to talk about standardisation with reference to all South African languages. In this article, the author attempts to show how standardisation with reference to Sepedi took place and its elevation from a dialect to an official standard language. It is important to give this background because the standardisation of Sepedi has led to it enjoying a prestige status as a LoLT in Basic Education to those whose dialects were not lucky enough to receive attention from missionaries, as observed by researchers such as Mojela (1999, 2008) and Webb, Lepota and Ramagoshi (2004). Next, the term home language is defined in order to give clarity and to address the mismatches between what is taught as HL in school and what is actually spoken in the homes of the learners.

Historical background

Research on missionary activities in the then Northern Province shows that German missionaries first landed at Sekhukhuneland. This advantaged the dialects spoken in Sekhukhuneland, such as Sepedi and Sekopa, as these were the dialects the German missionaries first learned to speak and write, as argued by Mojela (2008). Mojela (2008) laments that the missionaries promoted the dialects in the areas where they first landed and operated. Furthermore, he submits that Northern Sotho orthography introduced by the German missionaries was first performed in Sepedi. This consequently conferred on Sepedi a superior status, thereby sidelining and stigmatising other Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) dialects that did not have these missionary orthographies. Consequently, dialects such as Khelobedu were absorbed and taken as dialects of Sepedi. Rakgogo and Mandende (2022) persuasively argue that the decision to classify Khelobedu as a dialect of Sepedi was meant to accommodate the administrative system of the apartheid regime, being a purely political exercise which lacked transparency, consultation and a linguistic justification (Ramothwala et al. 2021). Mojela (2008) also pointed out that ethnic groups that were stationed in remote areas such as Bolobedu were not consulted during standardisation and classification. In line with Mojela (2008), the author of this paper argues that the classification of languages needs to be carried out with the consultation of the people concerned. In this case, Balobedu were not consulted; instead, linguists were the ones who took decisions on behalf of the speech

communities themselves. Had Balobedu been consulted, the classification would not have been accepted, and Khelobedu-L1 learners would not find themselves forced to learn Sepedi as HL. If they were consulted and their language had received missionary attention, perhaps Khelobedu would have been codified and taught as a HL. Majola and Cekiso (2023) write of IsiBhaca-L1 learners who are in a similar situation as Khelobedu-L1 learners as a result of their dialect not having received missionary attention. In their study, they state IsiXhosa and/or IsiZulu are imposed upon IsiBhaca-L1 learners as a HL. The critical question that this study asks with reference to Sepedi HL in the context of Khelobedu-L1 learners is: 'whose home language?'

What is meant and understood by the term 'home language'?

The term 'home language' can mean different things to different people. It is therefore important to clarify the term HL in the context of the DBE. According to Shin and Viruru (2021), home language refers to the primary language used in the homes of the learners. The DBE (2010:19) defines HL as 'the first language that the child acquires in the home, uses to communicate and interact with other family members'. The DBE (2010) adds that HL can also refer to the language first acquired by children through immersion at home, the language in which we think. The situation the Balobedu and other groups such as Bahananwa find themselves in is contrary to the above definitions. What they speak at home is not what is offered at school, and what is offered at school is different from what they speak at home. They speak Khelobedu at home, as observed by Ramothwala and colleagues (2022), which according to the definitions will be their HL, but they are taught Sepedi as HL. This is confirmed by Webb and colleagues (2004), who have observed that Sepedi is not spoken in the homes of the vast majority of learners in Bolobedu, in the community or even by some teachers. This issue cannot be ignored, because there are also other groups that find themselves in this HL dilemma, such as Bapulana, Batlokwa, amaBhaca and amaMpondo, to name a few. In the case of Bapulana, a study by Khweyane (2014) reported that Sepulana learners in the Sabie Circuit of Mpumalanga Province are learning Sepedi HL and that the usage of Sepulana is discouraged. Khweyane (2014) reported that Sepulana-L1 learners were struggling as a result of learning in Sepedi. The study concluded that the language issues in Sabie Circuit were not taken seriously by the DBE; therefore, no steps have been taken to address the language dilemma faced in the classroom by learners who speak dialects.

The above-cited studies show that there are learners in South Africa who are facing a language dilemma and that this dilemma cannot be ignored. This study hopes to flag this dilemma and to make recommendations for the DBE in order to address this dilemma.

Methodology

This section presents and discusses the methodology used to guide this study. It outlines the chosen research design and approach and provides justification for these. This section closes by explaining how data were analysed.

Approach and design

This study utilised both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The advantages of using both approaches are outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) highlight several situations where combining qualitative and quantitative data is particularly advantageous, such as obtaining more complete and corroborated information and explaining initial quantitative results. The case study design was adopted for the study because the study focused on Khelobedu-L1 learners in Grade 8. Cherry (2021:59) defines a case study as 'an in-depth study of one person, group, or event and it seeks patterns and causes of behaviour.' A case study was used in the current study in order to establish languages used by Khelobedu-L1 learners in different domains. In this study, the researcher collected data in participants' settings through questionnaires and focus group interviews. Adopting both quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled the researcher to analyse language use among learners across various domains comprehensively. The quantitative data revealed language usage patterns, helping to identify learners' HL. In contrast, the qualitative data provide deeper insights into the reasons behind learners' preferences for specific languages in different contexts. These findings underscore the importance of linguistic diversity and highlight the need for more inclusive language policies that recognise and accommodate under-represented languages, thereby justifying the inclusion of additional official languages to reflect the linguistic realities of the population.

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 Grade 8 learners from two selected high schools in Bolobedu South. The schools were about 6 km apart. The two schools were purposively selected on the basis that a majority of learners are Khelobedu native speakers.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse data in this study, which according to Shava and colleagues (2021) is a suitable method to analyse qualitative data; their view is that content analysis focuses on interpreting and understanding. Subsequently, content analysis could be described here as a qualitative research method used to systematically interpret and analyse textual, visual or audio content by coding the material and identifying patterns, themes or trends within the data. In this study, the qualitative analysis comprised interpreting and understanding the data, often through the discussion of specific examples. On the other hand,

quantitative data were analysed using frequency and percentage rate. Frequencies and percentage rates enabled the researcher to present findings in a summarised and simplified way. In this regard, the findings are presented in a tabular form as a way to provide a visual representation of data that is easy to understand and interpret.

Findings

As outlined in the previous section, data were gathered through questionnaire and focus group interviews. Findings will be presented firstly from the questionnaire, and secondly from focus group interviews.

Findings from questionnaires

The questionnaire contained four questions, which were open-ended. The respondents were asked to indicate which language they use in different domains (at home, in the community, at school with peers and when they respond to questions during Sepedi lessons), as well as to advance reasons why they would use such language.

Table 1 shows languages spoken in the homes of the learners in Bolobedu South. A vast majority of the learners speak Khelobedu at home, as Table 1 shows. Out of the 60 learners sampled, 55 of the learners, which makes up 91.7%, speak Khelobedu at home. Only a small pocket, which makes up 8.3% of the learners, indicated they speak Sepedi at home. In terms of reasons, the popular response was that it is the language spoken in their homes since birth. In contrast, those who listed Sepedi as the language they speak at home advanced that they are from GaSekhukhune.

Table 2 shows the languages spoken by the learners in the community. As per the information in Table 2, a majority of the learners indicated that they speak Khelobedu when interacting with community members. Fifty-five learners out of 60 indicated that they speak Khelobedu when interacting with community members. This alleges that Bolobedu South is a predominantly Khelobedu-speaking region. Sepedi ranked second at 6.6%, while English ranked last, which means it is the least-spoken language in the Bolobedu South community. The learners advanced that they use Khelobedu in their community because all community members speak Khelobedu. Those who listed Sepedi as their HL on the first question also indicated that they use Khelobedu when interacting with community members, as Bolobedu is a predominantly Khelobedu-speaking community.

According to the information in Table 3, Khelobedu is the most spoken language in the school premises. English is the second-most spoken language by the learners at school, while Sepedi is the least spoken language. Nevertheless, the learners are taught Sepedi HL. In terms of the reason, the popular response was, 'I use Khelobedu because most people in school are speaking Khelobedu.' On the other hand, respondents who indicated they use Sepedi and English did not substantiate.

Table 4 shows languages used in a Sepedi classroom during teaching and learning when learners respond to questions. As Table 4 shows, most learners (86.7%) use Sepedi when responding to questions in a Sepedi classroom, while a few (13.3%) use Khelobedu. Those who use Sepedi indicated that they use Sepedi since their teachers will struggle to understand Khelobedu. On the other hand, those who use Khelobedu advanced that they use Khelobedu because they are not proficient in Sepedi.

Findings from focus group interviews

The 60 learners who filled in questionnaires were grouped into six groups of 10 (three per school) for the purpose of focus group interviews. The learners were asked two questions: Which language do you use in Sepedi classroom and why? And do you use Khelobedu in written assessments?

On the first question, a vast majority responded that they use Khelobedu in a Sepedi classroom. The reasons are summarised in Table 5.

The responses in Table 5 indicate that five groups out of six said they use Khelobedu during Sepedi lessons. They advanced reasons such as that they express themselves better in Khelobedu, as it is the language they speak at home, and because Khelobedu is always in their minds. Their reasons suggest that their use of Khelobedu is central to the fact that Sepedi is not their HL, and they are not proficient in it. One group indicated that they do not use Khelobedu for fear of being penalised.

TABLE 1: Language used at home.

Domain of use	Languages	Frequencies	%
Home	Khelobedu	55	91.7
	Sepedi	5	8.3
	English	0	0.0
	Total	**60**	**100**

TABLE 2: Language used in the community.

Domain of use	Languages	Frequencies	%
In the community	Khelobedu	55	91.7
	Sepedi	4	6.6
	English	1	1.7
	Total	**60**	**100**

TABLE 3: Language used with peers at school.

Domain of use	Languages	Frequencies	%
With peers at school	Khelobedu	53	88.3
	Sepedi	1	1.7
	English	6	10
	Total	**60**	**100**

TABLE 4: Language used when responding to questions in a Sepedi classroom.

Domain of use	Languages	Frequencies	%
Responding to questions in a Sepedi classroom	Khelobedu	8	13.3
	Sepedi	52	86.7
	English	0	0
	Total	**60**	**100**

TABLE 5: Usage of Khelobedu in the classroom.

School	Group	Comments
A	G1	Group FGA1 mentioned that they use Khelobedu in a Sepedi classroom. They advanced that they use Khelobedu because it is the language they speak at home, and that Sepedi words are difficult for them to pronounce as they do not speak it in their surroundings.
	G2	FGA2 remarked they use Khelobedu to respond to questions in a Sepedi classroom because they do not understand most Sepedi words. When they fail to pronounce Sepedi words, they switch to Khelobedu.
	G3	FGA3 outlined they use Khelobedu in a Sepedi classroom because they are too accustomed to Khelobedu words as it is the language they speak at home. They also mentioned they are not proficient enough to use Sepedi; hence, they use Khelobedu.
B	G1	FGB1 remarked they use Khelobedu in the classroom during Sepedi lessons because they are not proficient enough to use Sepedi. They also disclosed they respond to questions in Khelobedu in a Sepedi classroom.
	G2	FGB2 mentioned they use Khelobedu because they are not able to respond to questions in Sepedi during lessons. In addition, they mentioned they struggle to pronounce Sepedi words, which make them uncomfortable using Sepedi, upon which they resort to using the language they are comfortable in, Khelobedu.
	G3	FGB3 contrastingly stated they do not use Khelobedu in a Sepedi classroom for fear of penalisation as it is not approved for use when writing Sepedi in their classroom.

Source: Adapted from Ramothwala, T., Segabutla, M.H., Rwodzi, C. & Thokwane, D., 2021, 'Exploring grade 8 Khelobedu-speaking learners' writing challenges in Sepedi HL in Mopani District, South Africa,' *Literator* 42(1), a1744. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v42i1.1744

On the second question, all the six groups interviewed indicated that they use Khelobedu in their written assessments, as the following excerpts show:

> G1: 'We do not know many words in Sepedi, so we use Khelobedu instead.'
>
> G2: 'Sometimes we forget that we are expected to write in Sepedi and find ourselves using Khelobedu…'
>
> G3: 'Most of the times we think in Khelobedu but forget to switch to Sepedi.'
>
> G4: 'We forget and use Khelobedu since we are always speaking it…'

What can be deduced from the above excerpts is that Khelobedu-L1 learners use Khelobedu to make up for the Sepedi deficit, which implies that it is not their HL. The other thing is that their usage of Khelobedu is natural to them since it is the language they have been exposed to since birth. If Sepedi was their HL, or the language they are exposed to, they would not run out of words.

Discussion

The results from the questionnaire revealed that Sepedi is not a HL to Khelobedu-L1 learners, as a vast majority (91.7%) of learners indicated that they use Khelobedu at home. The findings also revealed that a vast majority of learners in Bolobedu South do not speak Sepedi in the community, thus confirming Webb and colleagues' (2004) observation that Sepedi is not spoken in Bolobedu, even if it is used as a medium of instruction and taught as a HL from primary to high school. The focus group interviews revealed that the learners use Khelobedu in a Sepedi classroom. In their defence, they claimed that they use it because it is their HL and is what they know. Also, they admitted that they use Khelobedu because they are not proficient in Sepedi. This is expected as the learners are not exposed to Sepedi outside the classroom. Lack of exposure regarding the language used in the classroom is highlighted by Cummins, Chow and Schecter (2006:2), who say that 'language learning or learning through a language requires a lot of exposure.' Because of the learners' lack of exposure, they will struggle in the classroom and may experience a vocabulary deficit.

Based on the findings in this study, the author submits that Sepedi is not a HL to Khelobedu-L1 learners; it is just imposed on Khelobedu-L1 learners as a HL. This injustice, where a certain language is imposed as HL, pertains to all learners who come from dialectal backgrounds. For example, learners who speak Sepulana at home are expected to learn Sepedi as HL, as found in a study by Khweyane (2014). Khweyane's study also found that Sepulana-L1 learners are struggling in Sepedi and their performance is not satisfactory. Similarly, Majola and Cekiso (2023) write about IsiBhaca-L1 learners who are caught in limbo since their dialect, IsiBhaca, is not recognised as a language to be used in the classroom. In the case of IsiBhaca-L1 learners, either IsiZulu or IsiXhosa is imposed as HL. A similar concern has been raised by Cekiso and colleagues (2023) in their study which focused on the challenges facing IsiMpondo learners in learning standard IsiXhosa. In the context of this study, IsiMpondo is a dialect and IsiXhosa a standard language. The findings of the study showed that IsiMpondo-speaking learners were not exposed to the IsiXhosa language outside of the classroom context, as they were exposed to IsiMpondo language at home and in their community. Subsequently, IsiMpondo vocabulary conflicted with IsiXhosa vocabulary and complicated the life of IsiMpondo-speaking learners when learning the new language, IsiXhosa.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that this HL imposition does more harm than good, since learners are not coping or living up to the expectations. Expecting dialect-speaking learners to demonstrate linguistic abilities of HL or native speakers is a 'big ask' for them, as most of them only encounter these languages in the classroom. The study therefore recommends that the DBE should consider offering dialect-speaking learners first and second additional languages, and not HL, since the linguistic abilities of most of these learners are not of HL speakers. Also, expecting dialect-speaking learners to pass at 40% in a language which is not spoken in their homes and communities is unfair. English, which most learners in public schools learn as an additional language, is passed at 30%. This study recommends that the DBE take into cognisance the fact that Sepedi is not spoken in Bolobedu and offer Khelobedu-L1 learners Sepedi FAL, because there are learners in other parts of South Africa who are learning Sepedi FAL. Alternatively, the DBE could offer Sepedi, not Sepedi HL, and decrease the pass mark to 30% as is the case with English, as an additional language. If findings and recommendations from this study are not taken seriously, dialect-speaking learners will continue to suffer as a result of HL imposition.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to answer the question of whether or not Sepedi is a HL to Khelobedu-L1 learners, as it is

offered to them as a HL. This study found that Sepedi is not their HL by any stretch of imagination; it is imposed. Thus, teaching and assessing Khelobedu-L1 learners as though they are first language speakers is not fair. Moreover, expecting these learners to demonstrate linguistic abilities of native speakers is a big ask as their Sepedi exposure is limited to the classroom. This study recommends that the DBE should take into cognisance the fact that Sepedi is not spoken in Bolobedu and offer Khelobedu-L1 learners Sepedi FAL, as there are learners in other parts of South Africa who are learning Sepedi FAL.

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Competing interests

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Author's contribution

T.R. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines and principles for conducting research involving human participants. Participants were not subjected to harm in any way. Their participation was voluntary, and they were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their role and their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Faculty Committee for Research Ethics – Humanities of Tshwane University of Technology (reference number FCRE/APL/STD/2017/09).

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Data availability

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

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