

# AN EXPLORATION OF ORTHOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES AMONG SEPEDI GRADE 10 LEARNERS IN ESSAY WRITING

**Ngoako Silas Mashaphu, James Seanego**

Department of Language Education, University of Limpopo, South Africa

E-mail: [james.seanego@ul.ac.za](mailto:james.seanego@ul.ac.za)

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## Abstract

Writing is a language skill that every Sepedi language custodian should master. Learners seem to encounter multiple orthographic challenges in their formal writing activities, thereby deviating from standard spelling rules in the language. This study aims to critically explore orthographic errors made by Sepedi learners in their essay writing. It is a qualitative study which seeks to assess the quality of language usage in Grade 10 classrooms. Four learners and two Sepedi educators were purposively sampled for this study. Learners' formal activity scripts were utilized while teachers were interviewed to gather data, thereby employing document review and semi-structured interviews as data collection tools. Data were analysed thematically to identify and critically examine spelling challenges. Findings from this study indicate that learners face significant orthographic challenges, including differentiating between conjunctive and disjunctive writing systems, incorporating colloquial language into formal writing, and handling the insertion and omission of certain letters and vowels, as well as punctuation issues, among other issues. The study is expected to contribute to addressing overall orthographic challenges among Sepedi learners, as well as being handy to Sepedi language educators on how to instruct grammar lessons.

**Keywords:** *essay writing; formal writing; learners; orthography; spelling errors; teachers; writing proficiency*

## 1. Introduction

Orthography competence appears to be an enormous challenge to learners learning African languages. Writing serves as a basic skill across global languages. Plenty of Grade 10 learners encounter general orthography problems in their essays written in Sepedi, even though they are native language speakers and can demonstrate proficiency when speaking. All language skills are critical to effective communication, and spelling is a fundamental component of written language, which is essential to academic achievement as it enables students to express their ideas. Nondabula (2020) emphasizes that writing is an important element of language acquisition and serves as an important assessment tool in primary and secondary education worldwide. The problem concerning the present study is the alarming orthographic errors committed by Sepedi learners in their essays. Mokgolobotho (2024) used qualitative data to reflect on the spelling challenges experienced by Sepedi learners in a

Grade 9 classroom. The spelling issues seem to apply to many African languages, with Tshivenda and isiXhosa learners found to have similar challenges (Mugwabana, 2024; Daries & Probert, 2020).

Furthermore, Esther (2015) points out that spelling errors pose a major challenge in essays, as it becomes difficult for one to read them. Learners who make spelling mistakes without punctuation make it difficult for the marker to mark their essays correctly, and this will make it difficult for teachers to understand what the learner wants to say. Modipane (2018) argues that it is important that government officials continue to establish libraries in rural schools, a proposal that holds great value as it would give students access to a variety of literature, thus enhancing their reading skills and understanding of language usage.

Nondabula (2020) emphasizes the importance of developing writing skills among students as a means of enhancing their knowledge acquisition and creativity. By instructing students in the classroom on proper writing techniques and teaching pronunciation, teachers can help improve their spelling and make them aware of the difference in how words are written. For example, Sepedi learners evidently fail to distinguish between the graphemes /hl/ and /tlh/, and this may lead to grammatical mistakes such as writing “hlakahlakano” instead of “tlhakahlakano”. Modiba and Chokoe (2024a) identify this as an orthographic dilemma for the language’s literate speakers. As a result, teaching students to write can significantly reduce spelling errors. Writing is an important part of learning, as it enables learners to access knowledge and express their ideas across different subjects within the curriculum (Ngubane, 2021).

Although Grade 10 learners are native Sepedi speakers, they often experience spelling problems in their schoolwork. This challenge negatively affects their overall educational outcomes, especially in the case of Sepedi. This study aims to address the issue of widespread spelling errors, to seek to know what causes them, and to suggest possible strategies for enhancing student achievement. According to Gee (2005), literacy includes both reading and writing skills. However, teachers often do not pay much attention to the rules or conventions of writing, which contributes to the difficulty of Sepedi Home Language learners in writing. The alarming growth of spelling errors by Sepedi learners in formal activities led to the imperative undertaking of this study. While the purpose of this article is to explore some common orthographic errors committed by Sepedi learners, it also sheds light on language instructors on where emphasis should be put during grammar lessons.

## 2. Literature Review

This section commences by consulting global scholars regarding the importance of writing skills and their implications, concluding with Sepedi scholars who provide insightful ideas regarding common orthographic challenges in the language. Across the four macro-skills for learners, writing appears to be the skill facing multivarious challenges (Labicane & Oliva, 2022). Writing skills are the most important of the four language skills. Writing is sometimes a difficult skill for a teacher. This is especially evident as many teachers experience challenges in teaching writing (Bulqiyah, Mahbub, & Nugraheni, 2021). Hyland (2019) maintains that students often have varying levels of writing proficiency, making it difficult to design a course that caters to all students. One student may already have strong writing skills, while another may struggle with building basic sentences. On this note, Rahman, Ismail and Ismail (2024) point out that teaching grammar remains an enduring challenge for educators. This is due to poor instructional approaches employed by

educators. Challenging students may need one-on-one support, which is difficult to provide in classrooms, the reason being that many of our classrooms are overcrowded.

Bhandari (2024) emphasizes that students often face difficulties in organizing their thinking and constructing a coherent text, which may reduce their motivation to become writers. Likewise, Ramaoka and Chauke (2024) state that learners' ability to generate and organise ideas is also compromised by grammatical inadequacies, as they have trouble in transforming conceptualised information into written ideas. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions, which build learners' foundational skills and enhance writing experiences.

West and Meier (2020) argue that it is not easy for teachers to give individual feedback on each student's work. Providing effective feedback is critical to writing development, but teachers often face constraints in terms of time and resources. According to Segabutla and Evans (2019), the effectiveness of Sepedi writing depends on teachers being able to communicate with students orally, as good teaching may not be possible if teachers do not have Sepedi language skills. The problems associated with the teaching and acquisition of writing skills in South Africa need to be addressed urgently. Students often experience the challenge of writing words when those they write lack meaning and are full of errors (Condy, 2024). In addition, students often do not adhere to the components of writing prescribed in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2011), while teachers face challenges in effectively integrating learning with students' real-life experiences.

The problems of teaching writing in the home language stem from the inadequate supply of materials from the Ministry of Education. Bracewell (2020) suggests that it is important for learners to acquire reading skills before developing writing skills. Reading enhances students' vocabulary and introduces them to the formal language needed for instructional design. As a result, students become more familiar with the writing styles of the languages they attend, enabling them to write in those languages. The shortage of reading materials in the Home Language, coupled with the limitations imposed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), indicates that students lack the critical support needed to improve their writing skills in the Home Language.

The Department of Education (2011) has created the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) as a guide to assist teachers and students in teaching and learning essay writing. According to CAPS (2011:30), students should be taught to write using a process-based approach. Through an active process of meaning-making, the process approach helps students improve their writing skills. The writing phase is a strategy that integrates writing skills from the beginning of the learning process (Gezmis, 2020:565).

Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) suggest that platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have a significant impact on students' writing skills. It is shown that social media is ingrained in our lives and has become a standard form of instant communication. However, while it provides benefits and entertainment, it can also negatively affect children's education. Students may carry slang or abbreviations in their formal writing, which raises issues with their academic work. Over-reliance on instant digital sentences can reduce grammar and proofreading (Stoilova, Livingstone, & Khazbak, 2021).

Having said that, it is imperative to consult literature on the studies of Sepedi language orthography. In their study, Maledu et al. (2023) reveal that spelling remains a huge problem for Sepedi students at higher learning spaces. In their analysis they found that

most errors, such as incorrect usage of passive voice and pronouns, omissions, interference of pronunciation, and punctuation issues, are a greater challenge to Sepedi students. The above issues are no exception to the present investigation. Modiba (2024b) conducted an in-depth qualitative study on the orthographic challenges faced by Sepedi university students. She cites multiple metalinguistic aspects that seem to be an alarming challenge to Sepedi learners and students. Orthographic aspects such as conjunctive and disjunctive writing, incorrect passive and deverbatives, separating compound nouns, and loanword nativisation were noted by Modiba as problematic to both Sepedi learners and students. Furthermore, Modiba and Chokoe (2024a) speak to the challenge of differentiating the graphemes /hl/ and /tlh/ in Sepedi writing. Their results prove that some learners and teachers seem to have limited knowledge of when to apply the two graphemes. The above issues raised by Maledu and colleagues (2023), Modiba (2024a) and Modiba & Chokoe (2024b) are purely parallel to this study. The present study makes a further demonstration of how spelling remains a major challenge to Sepedi language custodians, with specific reference to learners in a Grade 10 essay writing.

### 3. Research Method

To gain insights that could help address the major and minor questions of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted. According to Mrabti and Alaoui (2024), the qualitative method refers to the technique used to collect qualitative information. This method consists of collecting and organizing non-statistical information (Matanda & Mawere, 2022). The purpose of using this method is to understand the difficulties learners face in Sepedi orthography by looking at the experiences of learners and teachers. According to Tracy (2013), the qualitative method helps to gather accurate information, enables stakeholders to share their feelings and experiences. The qualitative method helped the researchers to discover the detailed information that is important to validate the open-ended questions: why do these challenges persist, and how can we mitigate them? A collection of key methodological information ends up answering research questions effectively. Using this approach enabled researchers to present empirical evidence about the problem that motivated them to conduct this study.

This research involves a population from Mapela Circuit in the Mogalakwena District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The school in which the study takes part has a total of 615 pupils and 19 teachers, among whom three are teachers of Sepedi as a Home Language. According to Mannan and Afni (2020), information should be collected so that the researcher can analyze it, as that will help him in the research to meet his needs. This study purposefully sampled four learners and two educators involved in the Sepedi learning and teaching process. These learners were selected based on their scripts reflecting the desired data for the purpose of this study, while the two teachers are involved in the teaching and marking of FET phase essays.

Data were collected through document review and semi-structured interviews. Document review was performed by assessing learners' classwork books and examination papers, particularly Paper 3 formal activities. The interview method was chosen to enable researchers to engage in direct conversations with teachers, through which they can honestly express their opinions. Researchers were able to use these procedures to assess whether the methods used to instruct writing skills had an impact on the difficulties experienced by students in writing essays in Sepedi Home Language. Thematic methods

were adopted to perform data analysis; thus, orthographic elements were categorized into themes such as letter omissions, incorrect vowels, division and combination of words, among others. In terms of ethical considerations, clearance was applied for, and the study was granted clearance with project number TREC/936/2025/PG.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and analysis of the information gathered from the stakeholders. The main purpose of this study is to explore the challenges that Grade 10 learners experience when writing an essay in the Sepedi Home Language at a school in the Mapela learning area in the Mogalakwena District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Learners were given an essay task while teachers were individually interviewed. The section starts with what is found (the results) and therefore wraps with the analysis (discussion).

### 4.1 The Results

#### 4.1.1 Document analysis from learners' scripts

In the form of learners' essay scripts, they were analyzed and carefully arranged to find the answer to the research problem. The pupils were given the task of writing a reflective essay on "A day I will never forget".

##### **Learner 1:**

In the second paragraph, the learner connects words that should not be connected, failing to know when to separate them. See the word below:

*Sale > Sa le* (still)

The word *sa le* should not be connected because when it is connected, it no longer describes what the learner wants to say. The learner also struggles with the writing of raising-vowels, such as in the example below:

*Itukiša > Itokiša* (preparing oneself)

Here, the mid-vowel /o/ is pronounced the same as the high vowel /u/ due to the influence of the prefix /i-/. However, Sepedi language users should note that while the mid-vowels are sometimes pronounced the same as the high ones, they should remain written as the mid-vowels in paper. Sounds are not always written as pronounced.

Learner 1 further did not make use of an important asterisk "š" in Sepedi, rather they dwelled only on "s". The sound /š/ is a palatal sound, while /s/ is articulated between the tip of the tongue and the upper teeth- a fricative sound. Consider this:

*Letsatsi > Letšatši* (A day)

##### **Learner 2:**

Researchers found that learner 2 on the mind map made a spelling mistake. The learner wrote "mele" when he should have written "mmele" (body), omitting the letter "m". The first paragraph is not cluttered, the learner is staying on the topic, and it really indicates that the learner is making a conjecture, as this paragraph is full of errors. Consider these:

*Mošopologo > Mošupologo* (Monday)

*Kudukud > Kudukudu* (Emphasis)

*Di phautšing > Diphapošeng* (in the classrooms)

*Di puku > Dipuku* (books)

The learner's essay indicates that he or she has a spelling challenge because he or she is connecting words that should not be connected and separating words that should not be separated, thus resulting in his/her essay losing its meaning. The omission of the vowel "u" in the first two words was also incorrect.

The table below demonstrates some errors made by learners 3 and 4:

**Table 1**

*Data from learners 3 & 4*

<b>Learners' misspelled words</b>	<b>Researchers' corrections</b>
Mokgotše	Mokgotse (friend)
Nayona	Naye (be with him/her)
Sefelo	Se fele (does not end)
Matla	Maatla (strength)
Lenwe	Lengwe (other day)
Gage	Gagwe (his/her...)
Magonte	Makgonthe (Valid)
Thokofala	Hlokofala (to die)
Pello	Pelo (heart)
Bothoko	Bohloko (pain)
Le golo	Legolo (huge)
Jatše	Bjale (now)
Bo phelong	Bophelong (in life)
Baka	Bja ka (mine)

The above table demonstrates numerous orthographic errors that learners have committed in their essay writing. An in-depth analysis of this is found under discussion.

#### **4.1.2 Teacher Interviews**

To enhance the maximum understanding of the problem, two Sepedi Home Language educators were interviewed in regard to orthographic issues encountered by their learners.

**Research Question 1:** *What challenges do you encounter when teaching the essay?*

Teacher 1 : "Generally, our learners cannot write. They struggle to spell words correctly".

: "Limited vocabulary; learners are unable to express ideas because they lack

Teacher 2 the right words".

The above answers speak to the lack of writing skills. Failure to write is a challenge because if a learner fails to write, his or her essay may not be valid. Lack of vocabulary is really a curse for learners because they are unable to express their ideas.

**Research Question 2:** *What orthographic challenges do you think learners usually struggle with?*

Teacher 1 : "Our learners normally struggle with using punctuation marks, the disjunctive and conjunctive writing. In most cases, you find them separating words that

Teacher 2 are not supposed to be and vice versa".

: "Almost all aspects of orthography seem to be of a greater challenge to our

Sepedi learners. When I mark their scripts, I usually rectify them on the misuse of social media language, punctuation problems, dividing words, incorrect vowels, and omitting some letters”.

The two teachers are putting an emphasis on the general orthographic challenges faced by their learners. They put more focus on the punctuation marks. A text cannot be readable with incorrect usage of punctuation marks. The other issue raised is the inclusion of social media language in academic writing. As demonstrated in the previous analysis of learners’ scripts, it seems the colloquial language adopted by learners into formal writing is a huge challenge. This poses a major task for language teachers.

#### 4.2 Discussion

According to the data reading from learners 1 & 2, it is noticed that there are some similar orthographic mistakes committed by these learners. For instance, the issue of conjunctive and disjunctive writing systems, not knowing where and when to divide words and combine them. Wilkes (1985) states that there is inconsistency in the writing systems of the Nguni and Sotho languages, leading to orthographic problems for the writers. However, Sepedi, categorized under the Sotho language group, uses the disjunctive writing system. All Sepedi orthography guides have been consistent and explicit about this system. Even so, some learners continue to inaccurately employ conjunctive writing as shown in the data. Verbal words such as “*na le*” (to have) should always be written as such, rather not conjunctively. The other common mistake noticed is the usage and omission of vowels. Learners seem to confuse the mid-vowels and the high vowels, while in other instances, they just omit them.

The data in Table 1 reflect various orthographic challenges that learners seem to struggle with. Mostly, they omit letters where they are not supposed to. For instance, the letter “a” was omitted on the word *maatla*, the letter “w” was omitted on the word *gagwe*, while the letters “k” and “h” were omitted on the word *makgonthe*. Learners also make an addition of unwanted letters, such as on the *pelo*, wherein “L” was mistakenly added. Separating words such as on *legolo* and *bophelong* seems to be a challenge for them. On the other hand, joining words together, such as on the corrected *se fele* and *bjaka*, is not allowed in Sepedi. The conjunctive writing and disjunctive writing systems are a mammoth nightmare to Sepedi learners.

Comparably, data heard from teacher interviews indicate that they struggle with several orthography elements whenever marking learners’ essays. Most challenges they raised are parallel to those found in learners’ data.

#### 5. Conclusion

As demonstrated by the above findings, it appears that orthography challenges pose a huge problem for learner performance in the Sepedi language. The standard orthography is the cornerstone of writing proficiency. While we focused only on Grade 10, it may be worth noting that this problem commences at low grades. Learners should be critically engaged with the spelling patterns from the lower classes, as it will be difficult to grasp them at higher grades. As a matter of fact, among others, we suggest the following to resolve, or rather to minimise spelling nightmares among learners:

- Learners should practice reading a variety of books to develop spelling skills.

- Learners should spend more time being taught the difference between written and spoken language.
- Learners should have their marks deducted where they have made a writing and spelling mistake. This will encourage them to pay attention to writing and spelling.
- Teachers should not be reluctant to engage their learners in various spelling competitions, varying from classroom to competitions organised by the Department of Basic Education.

Grammar skills remain a huge problem for learners at lower and higher educational levels. This study demonstrates that as long as there is a lack of explicit approaches during grammar lessons, writing proficiency shall always be compromised. While a text-based approach is recommended to teaching grammar in the South African context, other methods such as teaching plain grammar may be considered by Sepedi instructors to improve learners' spelling proficiency. Future studies should focus on the possible rethinking of approaches to grammar teaching and instructional methods.

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