

INCLUSION OF THE SEHANANWA DIALECT IN GRADE 10 LEARNERS' SEPEDI ACADEMIC WRITING: AN ANALYSIS OF DIALECTAL INTERFERENCE

James Seanego, Sello Treasure Moyaha

Department of Language Education, University of Limpopo, South Africa

E-mail: james.seanego@ul.ac.za

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Abstract

Home Language learners always face multiple challenges in their formal writing activities. One of these is the frequent inclusion of dialects in their academic writing. There seems to be an unresolved argument regarding whether dialects should be included in the academic writing of a standard language or not. This article aims to analyse how Sehananwa-speaking learners include their dialectal orthography in the Sepedi academic writing. This is a qualitative study located within the interpretivism paradigm. Essays from 4 learners were purposefully sampled using a document review as a data collection method. Thematic steps were incorporated to analyse the collected data. Findings demonstrate that spoken variety plays a great role in differentiating Sehananwa as a dialect and Sepedi as a standard language. Speech sounds and lexicons reflect some gap between Sehananwa and Sepedi, notwithstanding the fact that both languages are sociolinguistically bound. It is also noted that Sehananwa-speaking learners are rigid in maintaining and sustaining the linguistic features of their dialect. The question remains: how is a language deemed officially standard while its dialectal orthographies are not recognised in formal discourses? For language development, vocabulary enhancement and learner academic performance, this study recommends that the incorporation of dialects such as Sehananwa should be allowed in formal settings like educational spaces.

Keywords: *academic writing; dialect; language development; learners; Sehananwa; Sepedi; speech sounds*

1. Introduction

Sepedi Home Language learners appear to encounter several challenges whenever writing formal essays (Maledu et al., 2023). Apart from other crucial essay components such as content, structure, coherence, and orthography, to mention but a few, one conspicuous challenge seems to be the inclusion of their regional dialects. As it stands, it is not clearly instructed by both home and additional language teachers whether learners should utilize their dialects in formal writing or not. Disheartened, when learners include their dialects in academic writings, they are often marked as “errors” or rather “non-standard usages” by language instructors. This brings to the fore the issue of language standardization. According

to Mojela (2008), the majority of the Sesotho Sa Leboa (Sepedi in the case of this study) dialects were excluded in the standardization of the language. He cites factors such as the influence of colonialism, lack of government coordination, the influence of early writers and publications, and missionary activities, which led to the Sepedi dialect of the Sekhukhune district being elevated and seen as 'prestige' over others. Mojela further opines that other dialect speakers are forced to accept the foreign standard language. Similarly, Rakgogo and Zungu (2022) reveal that the elevation of Sepedi from a dialect to an official standard language was perpetuated by qualitative variables such as the arrival of the first Sepedi speakers in Ga-Sekhukhune, the missionary activities that started in 1860, the codification of the Sepedi and Sekopa dialects, and the translation of the Bible and other religious texts into Sepedi. On the other hand, Mphahlele (2013) maintains that all dialects form part of the standard language. He further submits that dialects are the foundation of the standardized languages. Reading between the insights of the above three sociolinguists, Mojela (2008), Mphahlele (2013), and Rakgogo & Zungu (2022), it is evident that linguistic justice has never been done to the dialects of Sepedi language. As it stands, other dialects are not allowed in formal contexts except Sepedi-related varieties. For instance, dialects such as Khelobedu, Sepulana, Seṭlokwa, and Sehananwa are deemed as "errors" when learners attempt to incorporate them into their formal classroom activities. These learners are prohibited from writing and speaking the language they practice at home. Little do we forget that the spoken language influences the written language in the sense that a person normally writes what he/she actually speaks, in the spoken language that does not apply the grammar or the syntax rules of the language (Botlholo & Makgato, 2025).

Having said this, we are of the opinion that Sepedi as an official language should not be static; thus, it should allow for multiple regional languages to form its development. As Ntseli and Mokala (2023) opine, non-standard languages should be utilised in formal settings such as by learners in the classroom, in order to bridge the gap between informal and formal languages. Therefore, this article aims to pedagogically scrutinise how Sehananwa-speaking learners incorporate their dialectal speech sounds and words in a Grade 10 Sepedi Home Language formal essay writing.

2. Literature Review

Dialects face negative criticism when they are supposed to be incorporated into South African classroom discourses (Ramothwala, Cekiso & Mandende, 2025). According to Probyn (2009), dialects are prohibited in classroom contexts. This is a matter caused by the South African government's ignorance of the non-standard languages in the classroom contexts (Department of Basic Education, 2011), thus leading to teachers in some provinces and districts discrediting the dialects. On a lighter note, Majola (2022) heard that teachers wish for the inclusion of the isiXhosa dialect isiBhaca into the formal classroom. He suggests that this would greatly lead to the academic improvement of learners who seem to struggle with receiving instructions from isiXhosa language. In a study conducted by Botlholo and Makgato (2025), it was found that urban contact varieties such as Sepitori and Tsotsitaal are posing a serious threat to Setswana as a standard language, leading to poor learner academic performance. On an interesting note, they ultimately suggest that urban contact variety words should be adopted into Setswana to improve learners' academic performance. In making reference to Sepitori as a mixed language, Wagner, Ditsele and Makgato (2020) submit that Sepitori has a significant influence on the writing system among Setswana learners. This is merely because these learners ordinarily speak Sepitori on a daily basis. In

drawing reference from the essays of isiBhaca learners, Majola (2024) submits that no matter what, dialects will always influence the orthography of the standard language. What is raised by the above scholars is not an exception to Sehananwa-speaking learners. On an ordinary basis, they speak Sehananwa at home and on the streets; however, they are compelled to speak and write Sepedi when at school. This is reflected during oral presentations and formal writings, wherein teachers regularly mark their dialect as “language error”; therefore, unfairly deducting marks from learners.

Textual errors in Sepedi essay writing for learners are mainly caused by the usage of dialects (Rakgogo & Mandende, 2022). Various dialects such as Khelobedu, Sepulana, and others spoken across Limpopo and Mpumalanga influence how learners write in Sepedi, and change the official script taught in schools (Ramothwala, Segabutla, Rwodzi & Thokwane, 2021). These dialects differ considerably in terms of phonology, morphology, and lexicon, which contributes to orthographic inconsistencies in students’ writing. Ramothwala and colleagues (2021) looked at the challenges that Grade 8 Sepedi-speaking learners face when writing Sepedi Home Language words. They say learners are unable to write Sepedi because it is not their mother tongue. They further reveal that learners are not failing because they do not read, but they are failing because they are only doing Sepedi in school. They point out that learners, when writing in their essays, make mistakes such as changing the suffix “-ng” to “-ni”, for example, “sekolong” (Sepedi) and “Sekoloni” (Khelobedu). This is able to show us that learners are writing the wrong spelling as they are writing -ni instead of -ng, which in Sepedi is a locative suffix. Mphahlele (2013). Mahlangu (2022) support this view, as they investigated the influence of Khelobedu dialect on Sepedi essay writing among Grade 8 learners in Mopani District. Their study reveals that Khelobedu-speaking learners often apply certain dialect rules and elements to their writing, leading to writing errors. Their study is shedding light on the current research, focusing on Grade 10 learners as it reveals the root causes of dialect-influenced spelling errors among Sehananwa-speaking learners.

Letsoalo (2021) focused on the influence of Khelobedu on the writing output of Sepedi Home Language. He was investigating how learners fail to write Sepedi because they speak Khelobedu as a mother tongue, and end up writing non-Sepedi words in Sepedi activities. This means that Khelobedu leads learners to make spelling mistakes because they write non-Sepedi words. However, the present study is of the view that Khelobedu dialectal words should not be deemed incorrect, but rather should be accepted to accommodate non-standard languages in educational space. Similarly, Kgari (2022) researched the influence of the Sepulana dialect on Sepedi learning in the Sabie area of Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Their findings indicate that learners are accustomed to using specific Sepulana phonetic structures in the writing of their Sepedi essays. For example, learners replace “*rata*” with “*lata*” based on dialect, resulting in incorrect writing in formal essays. This implies that pronunciation patterns from learners’ dialects are highly influential within Sepedi Home Language writing. This brings to the realization that learners who speak Sepulana dialect face writing challenges when they start writing in the Sepedi language. These challenges are particularly evident in spelling, where dialect-based approaches have become more apparent after years of using home languages in schools. In all cases, failure to distinguish Sepedi from dialects increases the frequency of spelling errors. The two studies by Letsoalo (2021) and Kgari (2022) will be handy to the present study, which focuses on the inclusion of the Sehananwa dialect in the writing of Sepedi essays. While the above studies focused on the influence of dialects, Makgabo and Makgobatlou (2024) conducted an imperative study on a language interfering with another. Their study focused on

independent schools in Tshwane schools wherein Sepedi learners seem to confuse Setswana words with Sepedi words. It is said in the study that this is caused by the Tshwane environment, wherein both Setswana and Sepedi are dominant languages. This proves that not only dialects interfere in the standard language's academic writings, but also other recognized languages do so.

Rakgogo and Zungu (2022) maintain that all official standard languages were dialects before. This view is more parallel to that of Mphahlele (2013), who suggests that dialects are the foundation of all standard languages. That being said, Ramothwala (2024) in his imperative article articulates that learners whose languages were not fortunate enough to be elevated to official status are compelled to take one of the official languages as home languages; hence, the term 'home language' seems problematic in the Basic Education system. This implies that such learners are prohibited from writing their dialects in formal writing activities. This leads to learners such as Sehananwa speakers being imposed on the use of Sepedi. This brings unfairness to the speakers of these dialects, in particular, learners who receive academic punishment for including their home dialects in educational discourses.

As for Mojela (2010), Sepedi is one of the underdeveloped languages due to its lexicon as compared to European languages like English. To improve the language from its present position, this study shall recommend that non-standard varieties be recognized in order to increase Sepedi vocabulary and remove the stigmatization of the dialects.

Theoretically, this study is underpinned by Weinreich's (1953) model of bilingual interference. According to the model, there are phonetic, grammatical and lexical interferences among bilinguals. Simply put, there is usually an occurrence of these three linguistic elements among learners learning different languages. The challenge posed in this study is on the phonetic and lexical interferences of the Sehananwa dialect on Sepedi academic writing. The present study did not detect any grammatical interference between the two languages. It is only speech sounds and vocabulary (words) that Sehananwa-speaking learners incorporate into their Sepedi essays.

3. Research Method

This article followed a qualitative approach as it focuses on analysing data from the written discourses rather than from the numerical discourses. It is located within the interpretivism paradigm, which was useful in critically engaging the learners' writing skills, focusing on the prototypes of the inclusion of the Sehananwa dialect in their formal Sepedi academic writing. The study population arises from a school in Malebogo West Circuit in the Limpopo province of South Africa. This site is purely relevant to the nature of this study because the society speaks Sehananwa, a dialect spoken by Bahananwa ba Malebogo in the Senwabarwana sub-district. A purposive sampling technique was applied to choose essays from 4 Grade 10 learners for the purpose of this study. Scripts from the four learners were sampled because of their rich information on the inclusion of their dialect. The selection criteria were applied through the assessment given to all learners in the Grade 10 classroom. Document analysis is a method of gathering information by looking at what learners have produced in writing. The document analysis was done by giving Grade 10 learners essay titles to choose one of which to write an essay. The researchers monitored learners in the classroom to verify that the writing is done by them; then focused on identifying dialectal aspects in their essays. This data collection method provided strong evidence of pupils' dialectal orthography (Guba & Lincoln, 2020). Data were analyzed within a thematic lens.

Chivanga and Monyai (2021) state that data analysis entails organising, breaking down data into manageable units, coding and interpreting data in order to have a better understanding of a phenomenon. The nature of this article allows a thematic approach as a method of data analysis, thereby categorising the phonetic (speech sounds) and lexical (words) interferences per learner. A tabular form is used as a method of demarcating participants' data. Ethically, the study followed all the ethical protocols and was granted permission number TREC/955/2025: PG from the affiliated university.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the *Sehananwa sa Malebogo* dialectal words which are written by learners in their formal essay activities. Results will be presented in a tabular form, with the first column displaying the dialects, the second column showing their Sepedi equivalents, and the third column providing translation equivalents.

Table 1

Learner 1

Sehananwa Dialects	Sepedi Equivalents	Literal translations
hapeleja	gapeletša	forcing
hae	gae	home
diya	dira	doing
ikereya	ikhwetša	Finding oneself
tlhorisiwa	hlorišwa	Being terrorised
tlaiswa	tlaišwa	Being abused
mahayeng	magaeng	Rural villages
thusiwe	thušwa	Being assisted
bua	bolela	speaking
emisiwa	emišwa	Being stopped

The table above shows that Bahananwa and Bapedi vary in the pronunciation and writing of certain speech sounds. On the first two examples given, Bahananwa pronounce the velar sound /g/ as the glottal sound /h/. The sound /r/ is often silent. Few examples show that Bahananwa pronounce and write the alveolar ridge /s/ in the place of the palatal of /š/.

Table 2

Learner 2

Sehananwa Dialects	Sepedi Equivalents	Literal translations
ntše	dutše	Staying/sitting
Itlwa/etlwa	Ikwa/ekwa	Hearing oneself
kwadile	kwatile	angry
tshwanetše	swanetše	Must/should
mathada	mathata	problems
buwe	bolele	talk

Learner 2 also writes how he/she speaks, retaining all the features of his dialect. Commonly known as “dula” in Sepedi, it is known and written as “nna” in Sehananwa-present tense of “ntše → dutše”. What is pronounced from the velar as /kw/ in Sepedi will be pronounced and written as an alveolar ridge sound /tl/ in Sehananwa, as reflected in the

words “*tlwa*→*kwa*”. The /t/ from Sepedi speakers is the same as /d/ for Bahananwa speakers, considering words such as “*kwadile*→*kwatile*” and “*mathada*→*mathata*”. The verb representing speaking in Sehananwa is “*go bua*” rather not “*go bolela*” for Sepedi language speakers.

Table 3

Learner 3

Sehananwa Dialect	Sepedi Equivalents	Literal Translations
moo yena	Mo go yena	<i>On him/her</i>
Mo mosadi	Mo go mosadi	<i>On a woman</i>
Papa o	papago	<i>His/her father</i>
Yena a nyake	Yena ga a nyake	<i>He/she does not want</i>
Ntwe nnyane	Selo se sennyane	<i>A small thing</i>

In most cases, Bahananwa ignores the velar sound /g/; sometimes replacing it with the glottal sound /h/. The four examples from learner 3 in the above attest to this. The sound or letter /g/ was ignored altogether. Referring to any unnamed thing, Bahananwa utilised the words “*nto/ntwe*” while Bapedi speaks of “*selo*”.

Table 4

Learner 4

Sehananwa Dialects	Sepedi Equivalents	Literal Translations
otlwesa	Go kweša	<i>To feel</i>
nkhadimotja	Nkgadimola/tša	<i>Shouted me</i>
Tlwesana botloko	Kwešana bohloko	<i>Hurt each other</i>
O ya	O a	<i>He/she is...</i>
beya	bea	<i>To place</i>

Learner 4, as observed in almost all scripts read, does not include the sound /g/ in their writing. They write “o”, leaving out “g”, which according to standard language (Sepedi) should have come initially. One other conspicuous speech sound that differentiates Sehananwa and Sepedi is the lateral fricative /tlh-hl/. While in Sepedi it is pronounced and written as it is, in Sehananwa it is pronounced and written as /tʃl/. Sehananwa also makes use of semi-vowel insertion as reflected in the last two examples.

Considering the above data from the four learners when writing Sepedi Home Language essays, it appears that indeed there is always dialectal interference in the academic formal writing. Data shows that, among others, the phonetic and lexical interferences from Sehananwa dominate the Sepedi essays. Speech sounds and words written by Sehananwa-speaking learners reflect their environmental influence within the standard language. As it stands, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for learners who do not use Sepedi speech sounds in their homes and streets to utilise them in the classroom. The environment always plays a major role in determining language usage in the classroom (Makgabo & Makgobatlou, 2024; Botlholo & Makgato, 2025).

5. Conclusion

The fact that some dialects are not allowed in Sepedi academic writing proves the claim that dialects are being side-lined and stigmatized in formal contexts like educational spaces. Literature read in this study established that dialects receive unfair treatment from the elevated dialects (now official standard languages). Dialects such as Sehananwa,

Selobedu, Seřlokwa, Sepulana, Sekone, SeMoletři, Sehlabini, and Sepitori to mention but a few, remain unrecognised in Sepedi educational spaces. In this study, we commend Sehananwa-speaking learners who seem patriotic in their language, and thus call for the South African government, through statutory bodies like PanSALB and Basic Education ministry, to revisit the inclusion and utilization of non-standard varieties of schools. The notion of diversifying and pluralizing Sepedi academic writing by allowing and recognising the inclusion of dialects in educational spaces should be enhanced for the sake of language development, vocabulary improvement, and learner academic performance. While this study attempted to cover the empirical gap between a dialect (Sehananwa) and the standard language (Sepedi), future studies may critically close the theoretical and methodological gaps in dialectal interference scholarship. This study might have collected limited data, but a light was shed on the mistreatment of dialects in educational spaces.

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