

ENGLISH LANGUAGE DOMINANCE AND ITS IMPACT ON SEPEDI ORAL PROFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY OF GRADE 11 LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Received: 2026-03-23

Accepted: 2026-05-19

Published: 2026-06-12

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) on the oral proficiency of Grade 11 Sepedi Home Language learners in South Africa. Situated within sociocultural and multilingual education perspectives, the study explores how the dominance of English influences learners' use of Sepedi, pronunciation patterns, vocabulary use, and overall oral proficiency. A qualitative case study design was employed involving eight purposively selected Grade 11 learners. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and oral assessment tasks and analyzed using deductive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the dominance of English reduces opportunities for meaningful use of Sepedi in academic contexts, contributes to phonological transfer, and increases learners' reliance on English vocabulary during communication. Participants also perceived English as significantly influencing their everyday use of Sepedi. These patterns suggest that sustained exposure to English as the dominant language of instruction may limit the development and maintenance of Sepedi oral proficiency. The study highlights the importance of additive multilingual educational practices that promote the meaningful use of both English and indigenous languages in schools. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on multilingual education, language maintenance, and educational equity in South Africa.

Keywords: *additive multilingualism; English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT); language dominance; oral proficiency; Sepedi; South Africa; multilingual education.*

1. Introduction

English remains the dominant language of teaching and learning in South African schools despite the country's multilingual policy framework. This dominance persists in a multilingual education system where indigenous African languages, including Sepedi, are officially recognized yet often marginalized in practice. The legacy of colonization and apartheid entrenched English as the language of power, opportunity, and social mobility, resulting in continued unequal educational outcomes across linguistic lines (Mhlauli et al., 2015; Makalela, 2022). Although Section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) grants official status to twelve languages, including Sepedi, and the Language-in-

Education Policy promotes mother-tongue instruction, most schools continue to use English as the primary medium of instruction (Ramothwala, 2024; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025).

Research indicates that the early and often abrupt transition to English as the language of learning and teaching, particularly in under-resourced schools where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, may undermine both English acquisition and the development of African home-language skills (Cummins, 2021; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). While substantial research has examined the effects of English dominance on literacy development, academic achievement, and multilingual education, significant gaps remain. Few studies have specifically investigated its impact on oral proficiency in indigenous languages, particularly among secondary school learners. This study addresses that gap by focusing on oral proficiency in Sepedi among Grade 11 learners.

Oral proficiency is particularly important because it forms the foundation for effective communication, cognitive development, cultural identity, and deeper conceptual understanding. Strong oral skills in the mother tongue support rather than hinder the acquisition of additional languages and broader academic success (Cummins, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Grade 11 learners represent a critical stage in their educational development as they prepare for the National Senior Certificate examination and transition towards higher education or the workforce. At this stage, confidence and proficiency in both home and additional languages become increasingly important for academic participation and future opportunities.

Sepedi deserves specific attention as one of South Africa's official indigenous languages spoken by millions of people, yet it remains under-researched in the context of contemporary English-medium education. Furthermore, growing concerns regarding the dominance of English in multilingual educational settings have highlighted the need to understand how sustained exposure to English influences learners' use of indigenous languages, particularly in relation to oral communication, pronunciation, and vocabulary development (Makalela, 2022; McKinney & Tyler, 2024). This study therefore investigates the effects of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) on the oral proficiency of Sepedi-speaking Grade 11 learners. By examining learners' experiences and language practices, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on multilingual education, language maintenance, and educational equity in post-apartheid South Africa.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) influence Sepedi oral proficiency among Grade 11 learners?
2. How does English affect learners' pronunciation and vocabulary use in Sepedi?
3. What are learners' perceptions of the influence of English on their use of Sepedi?

In line with these research questions, the objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the effect of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching on Sepedi as a home language.
2. To determine the impact of English on learners' oral proficiency in Sepedi.
3. To propose measures to address the effects of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching on Sepedi.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language, Cognition, and Academic Proficiency

Language plays a central role in cognitive development, social interaction, and academic learning. Through language, learners construct meaning, organize thought, and

participate in socially mediated learning processes that foster higher-order thinking and knowledge development (Vygotsky, 1978). In multilingual educational settings, language proficiency significantly influences learners' academic achievement because it mediates access to knowledge and classroom participation (Cummins, 2021). Furthermore, in the digital and multicultural era, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool for negotiating cultural identities and engaging with global knowledge networks (Efrizah, 2025). Academic language proficiency, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), extends beyond Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and encompasses the specialised linguistic demands of schooling, including abstract reasoning, argumentation, and content-area mastery (Cummins, 2021). In multilingual contexts, strong foundational skills in the mother tongue (L1) support rather than hinder additional language acquisition. According to Efrizah et al. (2024), strengthening learners' first language can support vocabulary development and facilitate subsequent learning in additional languages. Cummins' (2021) interdependence hypothesis maintains that cognitive and academic skills transfer across languages when learners reach adequate proficiency thresholds. However, in educational environments characterised by subtractive bilingualism, where a dominant second language such as English gradually displaces the first language (Sepedi), learners may experience reduced development of their home language, which can negatively affect identity formation, cognitive engagement, and academic achievement (Cummins, 2021; Makalela, 2022). Contemporary multilingual education scholars further argue that limiting learners' full linguistic repertoires may constrain opportunities for meaningful learning and participation in multilingual contexts (García & Otheguy, 2020).

2.2 Mother-Tongue Education, Language Maintenance, and Linguistic Identity in Multilingual Contexts

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education fosters cognitive development, cultural identity, and stronger academic achievement (Cummins, 2021; Baker et al., 2020). In South Africa, Sepedi is one of the most widely spoken indigenous languages and holds official status. Nevertheless, despite constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity, the continued dominance of English in educational settings contributes to language shift, challenges in indigenous language development, and weakened linguistic identities among learners (Mabela & Ditsele, 2024; Ramothwala, 2024). From a sociolinguistic perspective, language maintenance is not merely a pedagogical issue but also a matter of power, identity, and social reproduction. The dominance of English-medium education often reinforces colonial language ideologies, marginalises indigenous linguistic resources, and limits opportunities for meaningful multilingual learning and oral language development (McKinney & Tyler, 2024; Probyn, 2024; Plüddemann, 2015).

2.3 English as Medium of Instruction and Language Policy

The Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) serves as the primary medium through which curriculum content is delivered, accessed, and assessed in schools (Ramothwala, 2024). Although the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and related language-in-education policies advocate linguistic equality and multilingualism, English continues to function as the dominant LOLT in most schools beyond the Foundation Phase, particularly in rural and township communities serving Sepedi-speaking learners (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025; Tshotsho, 2013). Recent studies indicate that the continued dominance of English in education often constrains the

development of indigenous languages and may contribute to difficulties in maintaining strong home-language proficiency among learners (Beckmann, 2024; Diko & Celliers, 2024). Code-switching and translanguaging have consequently become common classroom practices in multilingual South African contexts. However, sociolinguistic research suggests that these practices emerge partly in response to linguistic hierarchies that position English as the language of academic success and social mobility while marginalizing indigenous linguistic resources (Hendricks & Xeketwana, 2024; McKinney & Tyler, 2024).

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Sociolinguistic Perspectives Integrating Constructivism, Translanguaging, and Ubuntu

This study adopts sociolinguistic theory as an overarching lens to examine language use, power relations, identity, and communicative practices in multilingual educational settings. Sociolinguistic perspectives emphasise the fluid, socially constructed, and ideologically mediated nature of language practices while challenging monoglossic language policies that fail to reflect the heteroglossic realities of multilingual speakers (García & Li Wei, 2014; Makalela, 2022). The framework is further informed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which highlights the mediational role of language and social interaction in cognitive development and learning. These perspectives are complemented by Cummins' (2021) work on multilingual education, linguistic interdependence, and the educational value of maintaining learners' home languages alongside additional languages.

3. Research Method

Research methodology refers to the systematic approach and rationale underlying the methods and procedures used to address a research problem and answer research questions (Kothari & Garg, 2019). This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore learners' experiences, perceptions, and language practices within their real-life educational context. A qualitative case study enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena by examining them within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This design was particularly suitable because it allowed the researcher to investigate learners' lived experiences, perceptions, and language practices regarding English as the medium of instruction and its effects on Sepedi oral proficiency.

The population of the study consisted of 60 Grade 11 learners enrolled in Sepedi Home Language. From this population, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide relevant and information-rich data. The final sample comprised eight learners who were selected based on specific criteria, including their academic performance in Sepedi and their prolonged exposure to English as the language of teaching and learning. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was appropriate for an in-depth qualitative case study. The sample size was justified on the basis of data saturation, whereby additional data no longer generated new themes or insights (Guest et al., 2020), as well as the qualitative research principle that prioritizes depth of understanding, contextual richness, and detailed exploration of participants' experiences over statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected using two instruments: a qualitative questionnaire and a pre-assessment oral task. The qualitative questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses regarding learners' experiences with English as the language of teaching and learning, its influence on their Sepedi oral proficiency, and their language-use practices in both classroom and social contexts. The questions were developed

based on the research objectives, literature review, and theoretical framework. Content validity was established through expert review by two language education specialists who evaluated the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the questions with the study objectives. The instrument was subsequently pilot-tested with three Grade 11 learners who did not form part of the main sample, and the feedback obtained was used to refine the wording and sequencing of questions for clarity and relevance.

In addition, a pre-assessment oral task in the form of an unprepared speech was administered to assess learners' oral proficiency in Sepedi. Each participant delivered a three-to-five-minute speech on a familiar topic. The oral assessment was guided by the official CAPS (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement) rubric for Home Language oral performance. Learners' performances were assessed using the CAPS rating scale, which evaluates fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, coherence, and content relevance. To enhance reliability, two independent raters, namely the researcher and a Sepedi Home Language educator, assessed the recordings separately. Inter-rater consistency was strengthened through independent scoring followed by discussion and consensus regarding scoring discrepancies. The combination of questionnaire responses and oral assessment data enabled methodological triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework. Patterns and themes were identified in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework. Themes were generated and organized according to concepts derived from the sociolinguistic framework underpinning the study and the research objectives. The analysis involved data reduction, data organization, and interpretation, thereby facilitating the identification of recurring themes related to language use, code-switching, and oral proficiency.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by drawing on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework, which encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and member checking, whereby participants were afforded the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of transcribed data and emerging interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). Transferability was supported through the provision of thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures. Dependability was achieved through consistent data collection procedures and careful documentation of the research process, while confirmability was promoted through reflexive practice and by ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher bias. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee of the University of Limpopo. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Effect of Language of Learning and Teaching on Sepedi Home Language

The findings indicate that the dominance of English as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) significantly reduces learners' use of Sepedi in academic contexts. Participants consistently reported that English is the primary medium of communication across subjects, limiting opportunities to engage with Sepedi beyond the home language classroom. For instance, one participant stated: "All subjects are taught in English. We use

English more often in the classroom as well as outside than Sepedi. We only speak Sepedi during the period of home language.”

This evidence suggests that Sepedi is functionally restricted within the school environment, reducing learners’ exposure to and active use of the language. The limited use of Sepedi consequently constrains the development of oral proficiency, as language acquisition is closely associated with frequency of use and meaningful interaction. Analytically, this pattern reflects broader postcolonial language hierarchies and educational power relations in South Africa, where English continues to enjoy high prestige as the language of academic success, socioeconomic mobility, and access to opportunities. Such dominance often marginalises indigenous languages and contributes to reduced domains of use and weakened linguistic identities among learners (Makalela, 2022; McKinney & Tyler, 2024). The finding aligns with previous studies showing that the dominance of English as the language of learning and teaching limits opportunities for home-language use and development in South African schools (Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025; McKinney & Tyler, 2024). This pattern reflects a predominantly subtractive rather than additive bilingual environment. Furthermore, the finding can be interpreted through Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasises that language development occurs through social interaction and meaningful communicative practice. When learners predominantly interact in English, opportunities for developing Sepedi oral proficiency become restricted. This interpretation is further supported by Cummins’ (2021) theory of multilingual education, which argues that academic language proficiency develops through sustained exposure, use, and support across different domains of communication.

The dominance of English therefore creates an imbalance that disadvantages Sepedi language development.

4.2 The Influence of English on Pronunciation of Sepedi

The findings reveal that English significantly influences learners’ pronunciation patterns in Sepedi. Participants reported adopting English phonological features when speaking Sepedi. One participant explained: “English affects my pronunciation of Sepedi words because I sometimes pronounce them in an English manner.”

This evidence indicates the presence of cross-linguistic influence, whereby features of a dominant language affect the pronunciation and production of another language (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Such interference reflects a gradual shift in linguistic competence, as learners become increasingly aligned with English phonological patterns rather than those of their home language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this phenomenon highlights the role of language prestige and linguistic identity. Learners may unconsciously orient towards English phonology because English continues to hold symbolic power within a postcolonial educational system that privileges English as the language of academic achievement and social mobility (Makalela, 2022; McKinney & Tyler, 2024).

The findings further suggest that frequent exposure to English as the dominant language of learning and teaching contributes to phonological transfer from English to Sepedi. This pattern is consistent with theories of second-language influence, which propose that repeated use of a dominant language can reshape aspects of speech production in another language through sustained linguistic contact (Cook, 2016; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Consequently, learners may internalize English phonetic features more strongly than those associated with Sepedi, resulting in changes in pronunciation and oral language performance.

4.3 The Influence of English on Sepedi Oral Proficiency

The findings further indicate that the dominance of English negatively affects learners' overall oral proficiency in Sepedi. Participants reported difficulty expressing themselves fluently in Sepedi without incorporating English words. For example, one participant noted: *"English affects how I speak Sepedi because I end up forgetting Sepedi words and adopting English words."*

This evidence suggests a growing reliance on English vocabulary and indicates possible gaps in learners' Sepedi lexical repertoires. Learners frequently substituted Sepedi words with English equivalents, which disrupted fluency, coherence, and the natural flow of communication in their home language. The frequent insertion of English may reflect the increasing dominance of English in academic and social domains, thereby reducing opportunities for learners to develop and use advanced Sepedi vocabulary. Such patterns are consistent with research on language shift, multilingualism, and the marginalization of indigenous languages in South African educational contexts (Makalela, 2022; Mabela & Ditsele, 2024).

The findings can further be interpreted as evidence of limited lexical development in Sepedi resulting from insufficient exposure and opportunities for meaningful language use. As learners become increasingly proficient in English, their reliance on English lexical resources may increase, leading to greater dependence on code-switching and lexical borrowing during communication. From a sociolinguistic perspective, these practices reflect broader language hierarchies in which English enjoys greater prestige and functional value than indigenous languages in educational settings (McKinney & Tyler, 2024). The findings are also consistent with Cummins' (2021) theory of multilingual education, which emphasizes the importance of sustained exposure to and use of the home language for continued linguistic development. The results suggest that the dominance of English may undermine additive bilingual development and contribute to reduced proficiency in Sepedi, particularly in oral communication contexts.

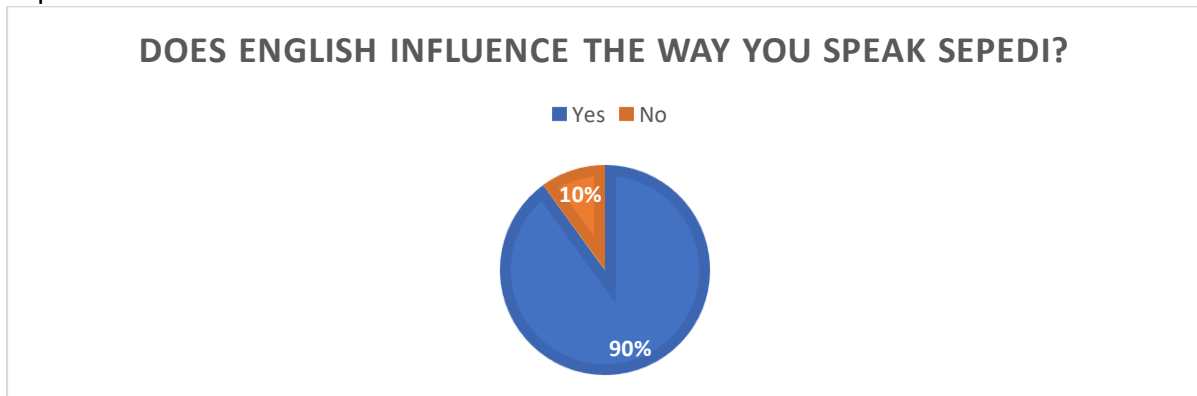
4.4 Perceived Influence of English on Sepedi Language Use

The findings indicate that the majority of participants perceive English as having a direct influence on their use of Sepedi. Out of the eight participants, six reported that English influences how they speak Sepedi, while only two indicated otherwise. This evidence highlights a strong perception among learners that English shapes their linguistic behavior. The majority response suggests that English is not only dominant in formal educational settings but is also embedded in everyday communication practices.

This pattern may indicate tendencies towards language shift, whereby a dominant language gradually influences and reshapes the use of a home language across different communicative domains (Makalela, 2022). The frequent use of English reinforces its status and normalizes its incorporation into Sepedi speech. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the findings reflect broader language hierarchies in which English occupies a position of greater social, educational, and economic value than indigenous languages (McKinney & Tyler, 2024). As a result, learners may increasingly orient themselves towards English as a language of opportunity and prestige while reducing their reliance on Sepedi in certain contexts.

The findings are also consistent with contemporary perspectives on multilingualism, which recognize that dominant languages often exert considerable influence on the linguistic practices of multilingual speakers and may contribute to the marginalization of indigenous languages when adequate support for home-language maintenance is lacking (García &

Otheguy, 2020; Makalela, 2022). The results therefore suggest that English dominance extends beyond the classroom and influences learners' perceptions and everyday use of Sepedi.



4.5 Synthesis of Findings

Across all themes, the findings consistently demonstrate that English, as the dominant language of learning and teaching, shapes learners' linguistic behavior in ways that negatively affect Sepedi oral proficiency. The findings reveal that the predominance of English reduces opportunities for meaningful use of Sepedi, influences learners' pronunciation patterns, and contributes to increasing reliance on English vocabulary during communication. These patterns suggest that learners experience challenges in maintaining and developing Sepedi oral proficiency within an educational environment where English occupies a dominant position. Collectively, the findings indicate that English dominance extends beyond classroom instruction and influences learners' everyday language practices, perceptions, and linguistic identities. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the results reflect broader language hierarchies that privilege English while limiting the functional domains of indigenous languages such as Sepedi (Makalela, 2022; McKinney & Tyler, 2024). The findings further support Cummins' (2021) argument that sustained exposure to and use of a language are essential for its continued development, while also aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and language use in cognitive and linguistic development. Overall, the study demonstrates that the dominance of English within the educational environment contributes to reduced opportunities for Sepedi language maintenance and oral proficiency development among Grade 11 learners.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effects of English as the language of learning and teaching on the oral proficiency of Grade 11 Sepedi Home Language learners. The evidence indicates that the dominance of English influences learners' use of Sepedi in several ways, including reduced opportunities for Sepedi use, phonological transfer, and increased reliance on English vocabulary during communication. These factors contribute to challenges in maintaining and developing Sepedi oral proficiency within the school environment.

The overall pattern observed suggests that English dominance extends beyond classroom instruction and shapes learners' everyday language practices and perceptions. Consistent with sociolinguistic perspectives on language hierarchy and multilingualism, the study demonstrates how the privileged status of English may limit the functional use of indigenous languages such as Sepedi, thereby affecting learners' linguistic development and language maintenance. The present findings also support sociocultural and multilingual education perspectives, which emphasize the importance of sustained language use and

meaningful interaction in developing proficiency. Taken together, these insights point to the need for educational practices that support additive multilingualism by creating greater opportunities for the use of Sepedi alongside English in teaching and learning contexts. Strengthening the implementation of multilingual language policies and promoting the meaningful use of indigenous languages in schools may contribute to improved oral proficiency, language maintenance, and educational equity. Future research could extend this investigation by involving larger samples and multiple school contexts to further explore the relationship between language of instruction and home-language development.

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