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The challenges of language assessment in a multilingual environment: the case of Sesotho Language in two Soweto High Schools

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SUMMARY

This study was undertaken upon realising that it is a challenge to assess learners in subjects that they take as Home Languages when they live in a multilingual environment i.e where many languages are used. This is especially so in big townships such as Southern Western Township (Soweto) where people who speak different languages live together. Many people have moved to Soweto from other parts of the country or from other countries and they are bringing along languages that they speak. In the past, people in different sections of Soweto were placed according to ethnicity and this meant that people who spoke the same language lived together (Christopher, 2004; Makalela, 2013). The main languages that were spoken in Soweto were Sesotho and isiZulu as a result there were sections for isiZulu speaking people and for Sesotho speaking. There were sections that were meant for Xitsonga and Tshivenda. However, after 1994, people became free to live wherever they wanted to, as a result people of different ethnic groups who spoke different languages lived together.

This new development in society brought about new dynamics in the use of language. People in urban areas began to find ways of communicating with one another. In many cases, people became multilingual. Generally, learners who live in these areas also became multilingual. Being multilingual is advantageous because it allows people to interact easily and it fosters cohesion. On the other hand, being multilingual can be a challenge in our education system especially when it comes to assessing Home Languages. Currently, the way that learners who live in a multilingual environment are assessed may disadvantage them. This is because in the present curriculum, learners are expected to produce oral and written work that is of very high standard, free of grammatical errors and does not contain lexicon from other languages. This is a challenge because such learners live in an environment where multiple languages are used and learners pick them up and use them interchangeably on a daily basis.

It has also been noticed that learners from a multilingual environment often use a mixed language during their oral presentations and written class activities as well as their formal assessments, and this leads to poor performance in their Home Languages (Khetoa, 2016). The learners perform poorly because they are expected to use a language that demonstrates strict adherence to the grammatical rules of the language that they take as a Home Language.

Previous studies have been carried out to show how some standard languages such as Setswana, Northern Sotho have been affected by other languages, but there is not much research done on how other languages affect the Sesotho language. One study that has been done on the standard Sesotho language by Ntuli (2016), compares pragmatic language behaviour of Mamelodi Lingo (a non-standard language variety spoken in Mamelodi township) with that of speakers of standard Sesotho. The focus of this study was on the gestures that accompanied the spoken word of speakers of these two languages.

Another study that was done on the standard Sesotho language by Khetoa (2016), looked at linguistic and extra-linguistic factors which affected learners preventing them from attaining very good marks in Sesotho Home Language in grade 12. This study focused on poor performance of grade 12 learners at a Secondary School situated in the Xhariep District in the Free State Province. Sekere (2004) also carried out a study which looked at the language varieties that emerged in the Qwaqwa area because of language contact. The focus of this study was on the Sesotho dialects that are found in Qwaqwa. The study also looked at the spoken and written language as it was used by learners in a number of schools in the area.

The present study looks at the challenges of assessing learners who are multilingual in urban area. The focus is on how Sesotho Home Language learners who live in Soweto are being influenced by other languages spoken in the area and what kind of mistakes they make due to influence from other languages. The study goes further to look at the performance of these learners in their essays.

In the study carried out by Malimabe (2014), it was established that the types of interference observed among learners include, adoptives, code-switching and grammatical errors. It has been established that Sesotho Home Language learners like learners of other standard languages in urban areas experience the types of interference mentioned above.

The study has looked at whether Grade 11 Sesotho learners use lexical items adopted from other languages that are spoken in their communities in the essays that they wrote for their formal School Based Assessment (SBA) task in the second term. The study has established that learners use lexicon from Sepedi, Setswana, and English. The study also discovered that learners coined words from isiZulu, English and Afrikaans in their written essays. It has also been found that learners make grammatical mistakes in their written activities because they confuse language structures and they end up using other languages' structures in their own Home Languages.

Recommendations to deal with these problems have been put forward so that learners who live in multilingual societies can be assisted because language contact cannot be avoided in multilingual societies.