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# Exploring the Importance Proficiency of Language Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

(Section LJRHHSS-G: Linguistic and Literature)

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## ABSTRACT

This study observes that the ability to use a language in a natural setting may be called language proficiency, which plays an important role as a communication tool and an instrument of higher education. The contribution of language in enhancing unity in culturally diverse settings plays a significant role in higher education. Restoring peace and stability can be achieved through proficiency in basic language acquisition skills.

**Keywords:** language, learning, teaching, proficiency, diversity.

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# Exploring the Importance Proficiency of Language Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

*This study observes that the ability to use a language in a natural setting may be called language proficiency, which plays an important role as a communication tool and an instrument of higher education. The contribution of language in enhancing unity in culturally diverse settings plays a significant role in higher education. Restoring peace and stability can be achieved through proficiency in basic language acquisition skills.*

**Keywords:** language, learning, teaching, proficiency, diversity.

**Author:** Department of Tuition Support and Facilitation of Learning, Directorate: Language Services, University of South Africa 2025.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study demonstrates the significant contributions and essential proficiency associated with language in learning and teaching contexts. It asserts that language proficiency empowers learners to tell stories that foster tolerance and understanding, effectively combating xenophobia. Moreover, the study emphasizes that language learning equips students with the critical ability to discern right from wrong. In the context of social cohesion, language learning and teaching provide native speakers with opportunities to express their feelings, foster self-esteem, and enhance motivation to learn. The study highlights the importance and effectiveness of language learning and the specific methods and techniques used in learning and teaching. It argues that change within an organization can result in positive outcomes.

The study indicates that Indigenous languages are fundamental resources and enablers for students to construe meanings cognitively, regardless of a fallacy claiming that successful learning cannot be spontaneously attained at the educational level (Monareng, 2022).

The study finds that students can infer meanings through indigenous languages for successful learning in a cognitive way.

### 1.1 The Focus of the Study

This study examines the proficiency of language learning and teaching in higher education.

### 1.2 Aim of the Study

The study aims to enhance language proficiency in higher education.

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to significantly elevate language proficiency in higher education, ensuring students are better equipped for academic success and professional opportunities.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is extremely important because it compares and analyses the works of other authors. Hofstee (2006: 91) argues that:

“A good literature review is comprehensive, critical and contextualised.”

A literature review is essential for gaining insights into and evaluating the contributions of previous authors. Without this essential practice, it would be challenging to comprehend and assess the foundational works that have shaped the current understanding of a subject. A literature review is

crucial for understanding and assessing the contributions of previous authors. Without this important practice, it would be difficult to grasp and evaluate the foundational works that have shaped our current understanding of a subject. Therefore, the study argues that cognitive and interpersonal communication skills can be enhanced by language proficiency acquired through a person's native language. The National Curriculum Statement (2011: 8) supports this by stating that:

"The Home Language level provides language proficiency that reflects the basic interpersonal communication skills required in social situations and the cognitive academic skills essential for learning across the curriculum."

In comparison to international trends, he found South Africa has a good completion rate, but the misconception persists and with it a fear that they will have to spend many years and, hence, much money on their degrees.

The study examines the value of tuition in Indigenous languages, emphasizing that student support in teaching and learning can enhance understanding of terms and concepts in their respective languages, for instance, in College of Education terms such as pedagogy, pedagogic, or pedagogue. The research reveals that diving into Indigenous languages can significantly boost students' comprehension of their learning materials, enriching their educational journey in exciting ways, (Magano, 2011).

Introducing the mother tongue in schools, colleges, and universities is a crucial step that does not aim to replace English as the primary medium of instruction. The study entails that language and culture can serve as identities. "Language is identity. It carries and broadcasts a people's knowledge and culture. A person's mother tongue is often best suited to convey the knowledge and sciences of his/her own identity," (Motsa: 2016).

Therefore, it can be positively explored that language identity is based on knowledge and culture to convey significant information in higher

education hence the term teaching and learning proficiency.

*Motsa (2016: 30-31) further argues that:*

"Language is identity. It carries and broadcasts a people's knowledge and culture. A person's mother tongue is best suited to convey the knowledge and science of her/his own community."

The article concurs with Motsa in that people's knowledge and culture can be carried and broadcasted using culture hence the term language identity.

Language diversity is of major significance because it promotes culture and identity. This is supported by Mabasa (2016) who posits that linguistic diversity can be promoted. The study emphasizes that language and cultural identity are inseparable; one without the other loses its meaning.

The study also asserts that language proficiency equips individuals with the skills necessary for effective interpersonal communication through curricular learning, as language identity shapes who you are.

*Ngcobo (2007: 116) postulates that:*

"English is not the main language of the majority of people in South Africa."

According to Ngcobo, it may be indicated that many South African people have their own language identities and cultural diversities beyond English.

The study postulates that indigenous languages should be transformed for student support and facilitation of learning whereby teaching and learning are promoted in institutions of higher learning through developing, translating, and editing learning materials such as glossaries, abstracts, or style guides.

Moropa (2024) explores that Transforming teaching and learning requires considering how most students learn, with particular attention to how the language medium affects their access to the subject content and their success.

*National Curriculum Statement (2011:8) ibid states that:*

“Language is used across the curriculum in oral work, reading, and writing.”

This study highlights a fundamental truth: “Without written language.”, communication relies solely on oral traditions and other non-verbal methods. oral communication and reading would not thrive. This interconnection underscores the importance of a well-rounded curriculum.

Several authors discuss language issues in learning and teaching, highlighting the importance of language proficiency. They argue that communicative language teaching can enhance learners' ability to interact with others and promote unity among people. Language serves as a valuable tool in both teaching and learning processes.

### *2.1 The Significance of Language Proficiency in Higher Education*

The significance of language proficiency can be as follows:

- Learning and teaching
- Ability to use language fluently and accurately
- Maintenance of interaction by people in various contexts
- Promotion or enhancement of multilingualism.
- Terminology development, translation, interpreting, language planning and human language technology

Proficiency contributes to the assessment of general language abilities. This is supported by Carter (2001: 137) when he points out that:

Proficiency assessment refers to the assessment of general language abilities acquired by the learner independent of a course of study.”

### *2.2 The contribution of language proficiency in higher education*

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the effective contribution of language proficiency to learning and teaching in higher education, both locally and globally, can be outlined as follows:

- Day-to-day communication to identify a person's language, identity, and culture
- Sharing educational values, norms, and standards
- To appreciate one another
- Patriotism
- ‘uBantu’
- To enhance linguistic and cultural diversity
- Access to information
- To make mutual interaction
- Expresses one's feelings and thoughts
- Enhance and acknowledge cultural diversities
- Links planes of discourse together.
- Global conference proceedings
- Interrelate and interact with one another for language proficiency
- Encourage students to study

The study examines how effective language learning and teaching in higher education can promote unity among individuals, regardless of their identity, background, or diversity. The study suggests that language proficiency can help reduce delinquent behaviour in societies where women and children are particularly vulnerable to abuse.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

It can be said that collected data in any scientific research study can be tested or verified whether it is valid, reliable, or accurate. There are various research methods, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches. The researcher has selected both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data.

According to this study, research methodology is the cornerstone or core of the research process to be followed including research designs and instruments ‘per se.’

#### IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is the path along which the research study plans to proceed. According to Creswell (2009: 3), “A research design refers to plans and procedures which are followed to guide the scientific research work”.

According to Creswell, a research design may be taken as a route map that guides the design to achieve planned outputs and outcomes to the long-term impact it seeks to change or improve.

Leedy (1993: 114) points out that “Nothing helps a research effort to be successful as much as planning the overall design carefully.”

According to Leedy, it can be emphatic that research designs are considered as plans and procedures to ensure research that span across all decisions, from assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis.

Leedy (1993: 114) remarks that “Nothing helps a research effort to be successful so much as planning the overall design carefully”. Research designs are plans and procedures for research that span across all decisions, from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis.

Trochim (2001: 171) observes that “Research designs provide the glue that holds the research project together”, while Hahn (2008: 17) is of the opinion that “A successful research design requires careful planning.” According to Hahn (2008), careful planning enables a researcher to employ the selected research design, in order to achieve the desired goal, or aim, of the study.

The proper planning of the overall design is the only way in which a research study could succeed. The application of the research design and methodology enables the researcher to gather data and information for the study. “Data may be gathered by a variety of data collection methods” (Mouton, 2011: 104).

The researcher chose both empirical and non-empirical designs to conduct the study and meet the research objectives. Various research approaches and instruments were utilized to

gather data. Three distinct types of designs can be identified: qualitative research design, quantitative research design, and mixed methods.

As indicated earlier, types of research design are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. Sarantakos (2005) observes that “A good quality research study design must have a clearly defined purpose, meaning that it must be characterized by coherence between the research questions and the methods or approaches proposed”.

A qualitative research design is unique, as stated by Sarantakos (2005: 50): “Qualitative methods as a whole are unique and marked by certain criteria”.

The researcher chose a qualitative research design, because of its significant use in establishing existing relationships between inputs and outcomes at an institution, as mentioned by O’ Sullivan, Gary, and Berner (2003: 489): “Qualitative research designs are of particular use for examining relationships between inputs and outputs in an organization’s work”.

This section focuses on the research design and methodology. A qualitative research approach was utilized in this study. The researcher chose this methodology to investigate the effectiveness of strategic management processes in the public sector. The research design is the path along which the research study plans to proceed. As Creswell (2009:3) states that:

Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting, where human behaviour and events occur. It uses multiple methods, which are interactive and humanistic in nature. In other words, the qualitative researcher visits participants in their offices, homes, and wherever it is convenient for them. The researcher believes face-to-face interactions with participants may bring quality data which they aim to gather.

The researcher gathers data directly from the source for a deeper understanding of the observed problem or question. This process is often interpretive, uncontrolled, and subjective. Creswell (2009) states that “Qualitative research

is a method for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue.”. According to Creswell, it may be possible to explore and understand meanings, perceptions, observations, feelings and thoughts of the respondents.

Another important reason for choosing a qualitative research design is that it focuses on the participants’ perceptions and experiences, and the manner in which these contribute to their lives. Creswell (2003: 30) argues that “In qualitative research, inquirers use the literature in a manner consistent with the assumptions of learning from the participant, and not prescribing the questions that need to be answered from the researcher’s standpoint”.

The study suggests that qualitative research design incorporates participants’ thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions.

A quantitative research design was chosen because it effectively analyzes numerical data using statistical methods. This approach is particularly suitable for testing theories or hypotheses. Additionally, the researcher selected this design because it can support or refute a statement and test for variables based on a sample from the population.

## V. RESEARCH APPROACHES

Qualitative research may be regarded as a quest for quality. As a result, this also includes the practical terms in which detailed, verbal descriptions of characteristic cases and settings are involved.

In quantitative research, the values of variables are expressed through numbers or symbols, allowing for precise analysis and clear interpretation of data. Creswell (2009: 4) observes that “Quantitative research is a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables”. He also contends that “Objective theories can be tested by means of quantitative research to find if there are existing relationships among variables” (ibidem.). He adds that “Quantitative methods are generally geared towards documenting subject attributes expressed

in quantity, extent, or strength, as well as guaranteeing – among other things – objectivity, accuracy, validity and reliability” (ibidem.).

The study's limitations are significant as it addresses relevant issues. Creswell (2009) deduced that quantitative research methods are of paramount importance, because they delimit the focus of the research study, regarding the sample size and focus group which are inclusive; hence, the term, *random sampling*. Mixed methods research refers to research formed by the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research approach.

### 5.1 Sampling Size

Sampling is the process of selecting respondents for a survey. Probability sampling to access availability (Görgens and Kusek, 2009:292). The total number of participants were thirty for questionnaires and another thirty for interview. The size of sampling was 30 participants namely females (23) and males (7) ages range between 20-29 and above 60. Therefore, all participants responded to the likertscale questionnaire and interview questions.

Their categories were language practitioners, linguists, chief education specialists, academics and teachers, members of the public, academics and students. The researcher has used non-probability sampling such as accidental sampling because it is the most convenient way of sampling respondents who are near and readily available for research purposes. The profile of the participants was sampled from the five-target group. According to Wegner (2016), probability sampling entails selection method randomly from the target population.

## Respondent's Profile N= (30)

|       |       |         |          |       | Gender |        | Age Ranges (in yrs.) | Total |
|-------|-------|---------|----------|-------|--------|--------|----------------------|-------|
|       | Asian | African | Coloured | White | Male   | Female |                      |       |
|       | 00    | 00      | 00       | 00    | 00     | 01     | 20-29yrs             | 01    |
|       | 00    | -       | -        | -     | 07     | 09     | 30-39yrs             | 09    |
|       | 00    | 25      | 01       | 04    | 00     | 13     | 40-49yrs             | 13    |
|       | 00    | 25      | 01       | 04    |        |        | 50-59yrs             | 07    |
| Total |       | 25      | 1        | 4     |        |        |                      | 30    |

### 5.2 Categories of Participants

The study consists of participants, who were categorised according to groups namely, academics, language practitioners, educationists and health practitioners.

Questions were directed academics, language practitioners, education specialists, health practitioners, members of the public and teachers. Both questionnaires and interviews for participants to take part in the study were used. The sampling size was 30 participants for both Likertscale questionnaires and interview questions.

### 5.3 Research Techniques

The study used research instruments or tools namely questionnaires and interviews.

### 5.4 Questionnaires

*Sarantakos (2005:50) states that:*

'Quantitative methods are generally geared towards documenting subject attributes

expressed in quantity, extent, or strength, as well as guaranteeing – among other things – objectivity, accuracy, validity and reliability.'

According to Sarantakos (2005), it can be emphasised that a quantitative research design may be able to show in numbers of participants who show agree, disagree, not neutral, strongly agree and strongly disagree for data which can be objective, accurate, valid and reliable.

A research tool will be used to collect information. Ten questions in a form of likert scale will be forwarded to participants for their response. Likert scale can ensure that reliability as the degree of consistency in the sense that it is considered as instrument that shows when it is used to measure subjects. Therefore, measurement of time is of crucial significance when the role of language in education and society is investigated. Validity entails the degree in which the concept is designed or purported to measure something as intended. Accuracy entails appropriateness of data.

Personal Information and Background (Please tick the box that applies to you)

i. Sex: Female  Male

ii. Age ranges: 20-29yrs  30-39yrs  40-49yrs  50-59yrs  ≥60yrs

iii. Racial affiliation:  Asian  Black  Coloured  White

iv. Home Language:.....

v. Highest qualification obtained:

Matric  National Diploma  Degree  Postgraduate

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

vi. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Your response to these interview questions could provide important insights into our level of awareness in terms of proficiency of language learning and teaching in higher education. Your anonymity will be treated with confidentiality and respect.

*Annexure A:* Likert scale questionnaires directed to respondents

| No. | Question  | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not sure | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|-----|---|----------------|-------|----------|----------|-------------------|
| 1   | Language proficiency is the ability to use language in a natural way  |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 2   | Tolerance of intolerance among human beings add value to social cohesion, language learning and teaching in higher education, workplace and society |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 3   | Language proficiency enable learners and teachers to communicate effectively  |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 4   | Throughout social cohesion, learners and teachers interact with each other by sharing observations, views, feelings and thoughts for story-telling. |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 5   | Language proficiency can validate effectiveness in language, arts, culture and education  |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 6   | Language learning should be diversified.  |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 7   | Teaching South African languages are being implemented at schools.  |                |       |          |          |                   |
| 8   | Language is used across the curriculum in oral work, reading and writing  |                |       |          |          |                   |

|    |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 9  | A language is an educational and societal communicative tool.                    |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10 | Change is required for language learning for strategic design to avoid stagnancy |  |  |  |  |  |

### Interviews

This study uses interviews as a research instrument to obtain data from participants.

As a research method, an interview plays a prominent role, because it engages in a dialogue to obtain information: “An interview is a direct method of obtaining information in a face-to-face situation” (Behr, 1988: 150).

When respondents are asked direct questions, the information they provide appears to be genuine and natural. Mertler (2009: 108) observes that “An alternative to observing people is to directly ask them questions”.

Although interviews can be taken as a special form of conversation, research interviews can be classified in accordance with their purpose and design. Therefore, according to this research project, structured and unstructured interviews may be distinguished.

Structured interviews enable the researcher to obtain information that is reliable, and unbiased.

Mitchell and Jolley (2004: 196) suggest that “The structured interview is popular because it reduces the risk of interviewer bias and increases reliability”. The fact that the outcome of the research study is not predictable should not influence the responses of the respondents.

Face-to-face conversations were conducted with the interviewees to provide empirical data about people’s lives. Using open-ended questions, the interviews sought information on people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge, which could be shared, because an interview is the most widely used method to conduct systematic social enquiry.

The interview schedules were tailored to the specific interests of the target group being interviewed, and sought to have a sense of their experiences, opinions, feelings and views as far as the role of language is concerned in society. Ten structured interview questions will be directed to the participants for them to provide answers. These questions are as follows:

#### Personal Information and Background (Please tick the box that applies to you)

ii. Sex:  Female  Male

ii. Age ranges: 20-29yrs  30-39yrs  40-49yrs  50-59yrs  ≥60yrs

vii. Racial affiliation:  Asian  Black  Coloured  White

viii. Home Language:.....

ix. Highest qualification obtained:

Matric  National Diploma  Degree  Postgraduate

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

x. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Your response to these interview questions could provide important insights into our level of awareness in terms of proficiency of language

learning and teaching in higher education. Your anonymity will be treated with confidentiality and respect.

*Annexure B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS DIRECTED TO PARTICIPANTS*

|    |  | Yes | No |
|----|--|-----|----|
| Q1 | 'Are you aware that listening, reading, writing and speaking are language skills which display proficiency enhances social cohesion in a form of story-telling in language learning and teaching in higher education'? |     |    |
| Q2 | Does language proficiency contribute to language learning and teaching in higher education promotes tolerance of intolerance to prevent xenophobia?  |     |    |
| Q3 | Do you agree that language proficiency is the ability to use a language spontaneously?   |     |    |
| Q4 | Does language learning require a change to avoid stagnancy?  |     |    |
| Q5 | Is there a relationship between language proficiency and effective communication?  |     |    |

*ANNEXURE A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS DIRECTED TO PARTICIPANTS*

The questionnaire statement required respondents to Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree and Strongly Disagree from ten questions. Respondents gave their opinions, feelings, thoughts and perspectives for statistically reliable results.

*Statement No.1*

Language proficiency is the ability to use language in a natural setting has a mean of 3 that suggests that the respondents basically agree.

*Statement No.2*

Tolerance of intolerance among human beings add value to social cohesion, language learning and teaching in higher education, workplace and society has a mean of 3 which is majority.

*Statement No. 3*

Change is required for language learning to avoid stagnancy in relating to strategic design has a mean of 3 which is a majority.

*Statement No.4*

Throughout social cohesion, learners and teachers interact with each other by sharing observations,

views, feelings and thoughts for storytelling has a mean of 3 that substantiate that the majority agreed to the statement.

*Statement No. 6*

Language learning should be diversified has mean of 3 that is the majority who agreed.

*Statement No. 9*

A language is an educational and societal communicative tool has a mean 3 is majority.

*Statement 10*

Change is required for language learning to avoid stagnancy has a mean of 3 which emphasizes that to avoid stagnancy change is required.

*ANNEXURE B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS DIRECTED TO PARTICIPANTS*

Question 1, it can be said that, out of 30 participants, 30 respondents said 'yes' and none said 'no' to the question that 'Are you aware that listening, reading, writing and speaking are language skills which display proficiency enhances social cohesion in a form of story-telling in language learning and teaching in higher education'? Therefore, the majority agreed to the question.

Question 2 'Does language proficiency contribute to language learning and teaching in higher education promotes tolerance of intolerance to prevent xenophobia?' 23 respondents said, 'yes' whereas 7 selected 'no'. The majority agreed.

Question 3, 26 said 'yes' meanwhile 4 said 'no'. Thus, the majority agreed to the question.

Question 4, 25 agreed whilst 5 disagree to the question that 'Does language learning require a change to avoid stagnancy'?

Question 5, 30 said 'yes' and 0 selected 'no' and this informs the overwhelming majority to the question basically agree that there is a relationship between language proficiency and effective communication according to this interview question 'Is there a relationship between language proficiency and effective communication'?

## VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study seeks to significantly elevate language proficiency in higher education, ensuring students are better equipped for academic success and professional opportunities.

The study found that language proficiency in higher education needs improvement to better support students in achieving academic success. It also discovered that the use indigenous languages can help students understand content more effectively due to their limited vocabulary in English.

The study found that clear communication helps academics and students enhance professional opportunities in teaching and learning. The study found that language diversity is still lacking among native speakers of indigenous languages. The study found that that the demise of South African official languages, particularly, the status and usage of Xitsonga in education environment at Intermediate Phase is deteriorating. The study has found out that the process of advancing and integrating Xitsonga language for officialdom has not yet been achieved due to the hegemony of English.

The study also found out that teaching and learning is no longer exciting due to deliberate exclusion of the Xitsonga indigenous language in teaching and learning. The study found that the education system in South Africa considers the Xitsonga language as official in theory not in practice. The study found that pass rate can increase when Xitsonga indigenous language be used as medium of instruction at Intermediate Phase.

## Ethical Considerations

Due to the point that these are sensitive documents, the anonymity of the names of the participants and their responses will be kept confidentially. This would imply that compliance regarding the petition as agreed between the researcher and the participants was not violated in any circumstances. All the information gathered was kept confidential, and all respondents were assured of their anonymity.

## VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Change of learning and teaching promote proficiency in higher education, language learning as compared to being stagnant should be prioritised. It can be concluded that no language proficiency no ability to listen, speak, read and write. Proficiency in language learning and teaching should be viewed as a communicative tool that requires passion, patience, and tolerance. The importance of language learning and teaching in post-matric education is rooted in the concept of 'Ubuntu,' and the promotion of functional multilingualism is essential moving forward.

New strategies should be explored to enhance proficiency in language learning and achieving fluency in communication emphasises the importance of language in education and society. For instance, developing learning materials namely, glossaries and terminologies in indigenous languages, especially those that have been marginalised.

Language skills should be in harmony with elementary proficiency for smooth and effective

communication that contributes to students support and success.

The National Curriculum should be re-designed to make sure that the native speakers of South African official languages including English be considered in all official domains to enhance their usage, status, esteem and parity.

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