

Reading challenges in Sepedi: A critical analysis of language education policies in South African Grade 1 classrooms

Nombuyiselo Caroline Zondi* , Joyce West  & Keshni Bipath 

Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*Correspondence: u11233410@tuks.co.za

Research on reading instruction in indigenous African languages remains limited, particularly regarding how language education policies influence literacy outcomes. This gap is especially evident in the context of Sepedi, predominantly spoken in Limpopo province, South Africa. This study explores the critical gaps that language education policies must address to support effective reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms. Grounded in Shulman's theory of pedagogical content knowledge, specifically curriculum knowledge, it employs a qualitative design through document analysis, using content and thematic analysis to examine five national language-education policies. The findings reveal significant policy misalignment, including contradictory stances on multilingualism, inconsistent terminology and a lack of coherent instructional guidance. Most policies fail to reflect Sepedi's orthography, particularly in the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness in the early years/Foundation Phase and offer limited support for teachers. The absence of structured progression in reading instruction and poor alignment across policies contribute to weak literacy outcomes in Sepedi-speaking classrooms. This study shifts attention from learner or teacher deficits to curriculum-level incoherence. Recommendations are made to revise the Sepedi Home Language CAPS to provide structured, language-specific reading instruction. Strengthening teacher training in curriculum knowledge and expanding access to culturally relevant, linguistically appropriate reading materials are also recommended to improve literacy outcomes in the Foundation Phase.

Keywords: curriculum knowledge, early reading, home language instruction, education policy, mother tongue education, African languages

Introduction

The simple view of reading conceptualises it as the combination of two fundamental components: word recognition and language comprehension (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). Word recognition involves accurately and fluently decoding printed words, while language comprehension entails understanding the meaning and structure of language at both the sentence and discourse levels (Pretorius & Murray, 2019). As such, reading is a complex cognitive process that encompasses decoding, comprehension and interpretation of written texts (Quigley, 2020). Consequently, reading is not only crucial for academic success, but also plays a significant role in personal growth and active social participation (Howie et al., 2017; Pretorius & Murray, 2019).

In the South African context, proficient reading skills are particularly important due to ongoing challenges related to low literacy rates among learners (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023). Mastering reading skills empowers individuals to access information, expand their knowledge and engage in critical thinking (Quigley, 2020). To evaluate literacy performance, South Africa participates in several large-scale international assessments conducted every three to five years. These assessments (e.g. PIRLS [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study], SACMEQ [Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational

Quality] and TIMMS [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study]) involve learners from various countries and grade levels, evaluating their skills in different subjects. The data collected from these assessments enables the South African education system to benchmark its performance globally, offering insights into whether literacy outcomes are improving, declining, or stagnating (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Van Staden & Gustafsson, 2022).

Such large-scale international assessments are essential for tracking literacy and numeracy trends in the South African education system, as they provide internationally comparable data crucial for shaping educational policy (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Gust et al., 2024). However, while these assessments provide valuable insights into literacy trends, smaller national diagnostic tools such as EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment), NSES (National School Effectiveness Study) and NEEDU (National Education and Evaluation Development Unit) are primarily aimed at identifying specific local reading challenges (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). However, these national tools lack the international comparability of SACMEQ, and PIRLS, as they are conducted at the national or local level using various methodologies (Gust et al., 2024). Consequently, TIMSS, SACMEQ and PIRLS remain the primary instruments for evaluating South Africa's educational performance on an international scale and guiding evidence-based policy decisions (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Gust et al., 2024).

The most recent PIRLS 2021 assessment revealed that 81% of South African learners were unable to comprehend texts in any local language (DBE, 2023; Van Staden et al., 2023). PIRLS categorises learners' achievements into four international benchmarks: advanced (625 points), high (550 points), intermediate (475 points) and low (400 points) (DBE, 2023). It also revealed significant regional disparities, with provinces such as Limpopo, North-West, Free State and Mpumalanga experiencing marked declines in reading proficiency. Notably, 97% of learners in Limpopo, despite being assessed in their home language, scored an average of only 244 points – well below the international minimum of 400 (Van Staden et al., 2023). These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted reading interventions. While PIRLS provides important data on reading comprehension outcomes and associated contextual factors, it does not investigate other crucial aspects such as the role of language education policies in shaping literacy outcomes. PIRLS primarily focuses on reading comprehension skills rather than the foundational components that contribute to comprehension, such as reading fluency, vocabulary, phonics and phonemic awareness (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Consequently, it does not fully account for the complex factors influencing literacy acquisition, particularly in indigenous African languages. Understanding the linguistic structures and pedagogical requirements for teaching reading in indigenous African languages could provide valuable insights into improving literacy instruction.

This article presents findings drawn from the first author's doctoral study, conducted under the supervision of the co-authors. The study investigated the gaps in language education policies affecting reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms. Using Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) framework, with a focus on curriculum knowledge, the study offers a detailed analysis of how these policies shape teaching practices and literacy outcomes. By examining instances of policy misalignment such as contradictions in multilingualism and limited guidance for teaching phonics and phonemic awareness, the study highlights the urgent need for curriculum reforms. These reforms aim to improve policy coherence and strengthen support for early literacy development in Sepedi. The findings discussed are drawn from the first author's doctoral dissertation.

Implementing language policies in reading instruction

Mother tongue instruction, according to Evans and Mendez Acosta (2021), involves teaching young learners basic reading skills in their native language when they first start school. However, in many African countries, children are traditionally educated in colonial languages such as English, French, or Portuguese (Piper et al., 2016; McKinney, 2017). This practice continues even though most learners lack proficiency in these languages when they enter school (McKinney, 2017; Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021). In recent years, there has been growing evidence to support the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction (Piper et al., 2018; Brunette et al., 2019; Laitin et al., 2019; Mohohlwane, 2019; Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021; Nakamura et al., 2023; Mandyata et al., 2024).

Research consistently demonstrates the numerous benefits of mother tongue education (Nakamura et al.,

2023; Mandyata et al., 2024). For instance, Nakamura et al. (2023) argue that learners instructed in their mother tongue can more effectively utilise pre-existing language skills when decoding new words. Moreover, attaining reading proficiency in one's native language often facilitates the transfer of these skills to a second language, leading to enhanced performance in the latter (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016; Piper et al., 2018; Brunette et al., 2019; Nakamura et al., 2023). This trend is evident in various African countries, including South Africa (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016), Kenya (Piper et al., 2016), Uganda (Brunette et al., 2019), Cameroon (Laitin et al., 2019) and Zambia (Mandyata et al., 2024). Additionally, learners tend to display greater engagement and confidence when the medium of instruction aligns with their native language (Brunette et al., 2019; Nakamura et al., 2023).

In South Africa, language education policies such as the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP; Department of Education [DoE], 1997), the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS; 2011), the Incremental Introduction of African Languages Policy (IIAL; 2013), the Sepedi National Reading Framework and the National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in the Foundation Phase (2020) advocate for the use of indigenous African languages alongside English. These policies endorse an additive bilingual approach, which seeks to maintain the mother tongue while promoting the acquisition of additional languages (Van Staden et al., 2023). However, despite the intended goals of these policies, scholars note that language practices at schools have changed minimally (Kamwangamalu, 2000; Heugh, 2000; 2013; Brunette et al., 2019). This lack of transformation is especially problematic in the Foundation Phase, where learners continue to encounter challenges in developing reading and writing skills in any language (Kamwangamalu, 2000; Plüddemann, 2015; Potgieter & Anthonissen, 2017; McKinney, 2017; Mohohlwane, 2019).

Although South Africa's official language education policies view multilingualism as a vital educational resource, the envisaged six years of mother tongue instruction at the primary level, as promoted by the LiEP, is frequently not realised (Kamwangamalu, 2000; Potgieter & Anthonissen, 2017). Despite the policy frameworks in place, many educators continue to prioritise English as the primary medium of instruction (Dalvit et al., 2009; Plüddemann, 2015; Potgieter & Anthonissen, 2017; Mohohlwane, 2019; Nakamura et al., 2023; Mandyata et al., 2024).

Even with the demonstrated advantages of mother tongue education and supportive policy frameworks, some parents in school governance bodies still prefer their children to be taught in colonial languages. This preference often stems from the perception that English holds greater social and economic value than indigenous languages (McKinney, 2017). Many parents believe that proficiency in English better prepares their children for future career opportunities, as English is viewed as a global language associated with enhanced employment prospects (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007; Heugh, 2013; Cekiso, 2017). Consequently, this parental inclination can inadvertently undermine the implementation of mother tongue education policies, contributing to poor reading outcomes in South African schools (Heugh, 2013;

Nakamura et al., 2023; Mandyata et al., 2024). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the root causes of these poor reading outcomes in the context of South African language education policies. While the potential benefits of mother tongue education are well established, challenges related to policy implementation often hinder these outcomes, as explored in the next section.

Challenges in implementing language education policies

One of the primary challenges contributing to poor literacy outcomes in South Africa is the inconsistent implementation of mother tongue education (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018; Nakamura et al., 2023; Mandyata et al., 2024). In the Foundation Phase, learners often either lack adequate instruction in their mother tongue, or are required to transition too rapidly to English by Grade 4 (Mandyata et al., 2024). Typically, South African learners begin their education using both their mother tongue (e.g. Sepedi) and English from Grade 1 (Pretorius & Murray, 2023). However, by Grade 4, English becomes the exclusive language of learning and teaching (LoLT) (Heugh, 2000; Plüddemann, 2015; Pretorius, 2015). In rural areas, where linguistic homogeneity is common, English often becomes the dominant medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards (Heugh, 2013; Piper et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a significant challenge in implementing language education policies is the scarcity of reading materials in indigenous African languages during the Foundation Phase (Edwards & Ngwaru, 2011; Nakamura et al., 2023). Ideally, reading resources should be available in both indigenous languages and English to support vocabulary development systematically (Heugh, 2013; Nakamura et al., 2023). However, simply translating English materials is often inadequate, as these resources lack cultural relevance (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007; Dalvit et al., 2009).

A related issue is that English and indigenous African languages differ significantly in syntax, morphology, orthography and phonology (Edwards & Ngwaru, 2011; Pretorius, 2019). As a result, teaching materials developed for English do not seamlessly transfer to indigenous language contexts, highlighting the need for linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches (Zimmerman & Howie, 2016).

The inadequacy of in-service teacher training for early reading in Sepedi also hampers the effective implementation of language policies. Many training programmes are critiqued for their generic content, which fails to address the specific linguistic and cultural needs of learners (Kimathi & Bertram, 2020). Additionally, the curriculum for indigenous African languages, including Sepedi, lacks structured guidance for teaching reading, creating inconsistencies in classroom practice (Mohohlwane, 2019).

This article therefore draws from research findings that explore the critical gaps that language education policies must address to support effective reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms. By employing the PCK framework, with a specific focus on curriculum knowledge, this study examines how language education policies

influence instructional practices and reading outcomes in Sepedi classrooms. The analysis specifically considers how curriculum design, policy coherence and the clarity of policy guidelines affect teachers' ability to implement effective reading instruction.

The insights generated from this study contribute to evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving the alignment of language education policies with classroom practices. By identifying gaps in curriculum guidance and policy implementation, the findings inform strategies to support effective reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms.

Theoretical framework

This article investigates the critical gaps in language education policies that hinder effective reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms. It asks: How do national language education policies align with the practical demands of teaching reading in Sepedi, and what curriculum guidance is missing to support teachers effectively?

While various studies have addressed general literacy challenges in South Africa, there remains limited research on how curriculum policy impacts reading instruction in indigenous African languages, particularly Sepedi. Despite Sepedi being widely spoken in Limpopo classrooms, policies offer little structured, language-specific guidance especially regarding phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary and fluency instruction. This gap presents practical challenges for teachers who lack the tools and support needed to deliver effective early reading instruction.

Drawing on the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) framework, with a focus on curriculum knowledge, this study examines how language education policies shape classroom practices. The analysis highlights how poor policy alignment and insufficient curriculum guidance directly impact teachers' ability to foster reading development in the Foundation Phase.

By making these gaps visible, the article contributes to evidence-based recommendations for improving Sepedi literacy instruction through clearer curriculum guidance, stronger policy coherence and more consistent instructional support for teachers.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist stance acknowledges that educational policies and practices are shaped by context, language and meaning-making processes (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). This approach enabled a deep exploration of how national language education policies in South Africa conceptualise reading instruction in Sepedi, particularly in Grade 1 classrooms. The study sought to examine the critical requirements that language education policies must address to support effective early literacy instruction in indigenous African languages.

Document analysis was selected as the most suitable method for this investigation. This approach enabled us to

critically examine how reading is framed in official policy texts and to identify both explicit guidelines and subtle misalignments across policy documents. Unlike interviews or classroom observations, document analysis allowed the study to focus on the intended curriculum and the policy-level guidance it provides for Sepedi reading instruction. This method was particularly appropriate for uncovering inconsistencies and gaps that may impact teaching practices and reading outcomes.

Data collection

Five national policy documents were purposively selected based on their relevance to early reading instruction and their alignment with Grade 1 curriculum expectations, connection to the Foundation Phase curriculum (i.e. CAPS) and the potential to offer insights into national literacy goals and implementation strategies. The documents included: Sepedi Home Language CAPS (2011); National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase (2020); Sepedi National Reading Framework (2020); LiEP (1997) and IIAL (2013). While the Sepedi National Reading Framework and the National Framework for the Teaching of Reading are not formal policies, they were included due to their influence on instructional practices and their alignment with existing curricular goals.

The documents were reviewed for their treatment of five foundational reading components: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, as these are essential for early reading development. In addition, three instructional strategies; shared reading, group-guided reading and independent reading were included in the analysis to evaluate whether policies promote practical methods used in Foundation Phase classrooms. The frameworks were also examined for how they address the promotion and preservation of indigenous languages, particularly in relation to Sepedi instruction in the Foundation Phase.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used to systematically examine the policy documents, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, emphases and gaps (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A primarily deductive approach was applied, using predetermined categories based on five foundational reading components and instructional strategies. This allowed for a structured comparison across the five national language education policies, focusing on how reading instruction is conceptualised and supported in Sepedi. The analysis was guided by Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) framework, specifically curriculum knowledge, which focuses on what to teach, when and how content aligns across grades. This lens enabled an evaluation of whether policy documents provide structured, coherent guidance on teaching reading in Sepedi and helped identify policy gaps that may hinder classroom implementation. Through this approach, the study offers insights into how national policies address, or fail to

address, the foundational requirements for early reading development in Sepedi.

Ethical considerations

As the study focused exclusively on publicly available policy documents, no human participants were involved. However, ethical principles of academic integrity, transparency and neutrality were upheld throughout the research. Documents were accessed through official government websites and referenced appropriately. A consistent coding and analysis procedure was applied to ensure trustworthiness and to avoid misinterpretation. The analysis was conducted without bias toward any institution, ideological position, or policy stance.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and interprets the key findings from the review of five national language education policies to explore the critical requirements needed to support effective reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms. Guided by Shulman's (1986) theory of curriculum knowledge, the findings are analysed in terms of how clearly these policies outline what should be taught, how reading should be taught and how reading content aligns across the Foundation Phase. Three major themes emerged: first, contradictions in language policy orientations; second, gaps in reading requirements and instructional guidance; and thirdly, the limited integration of Sepedi's linguistic structure in curriculum documents.

Theme 1: Contradictions in language policy orientations

Across the five policy documents the Sepedi Home Language CAPS, Sepedi National Reading Framework, National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase, LiEP and IIAL, a major contradiction is evident in their approach to multilingualism. While the LiEP, IIAL, CAPS and the National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African languages in the Foundation Phase promote multilingualism and additive bilingualism, the Sepedi National Reading Framework adopts a monolingual stance by positioning Sepedi as the sole medium of instruction. The Sepedi National Reading Framework, for instance, is described as developed to support teachers with structured lesson plans, assessment tools and culturally appropriate teaching materials entirely in Sepedi, with no reference to English or multilingual instructional strategies. Although the word 'monolingual' is not explicitly used, the document's silence on multilingual transition reflects an implicit preference for Sepedi-only instruction.

This contradiction creates uncertainty for teachers in rural classrooms, where practical decisions about language use often fall to them, unsupported by coordinated national guidance. From a curriculum knowledge perspective, this misalignment limits teachers' ability to confidently integrate multilingual approaches, or transition learners effectively between Sepedi and English.

The historical evolution of language policy in South Africa partly explains this misalignment. As Heugh (2013) and Potgieter and Anthonissen (2017) argue, the post-apartheid development of language policies and curricula occurred in silos, resulting in fragmented implementation. This legacy continues to shape current challenges, where multilingual policy intentions are contradicted by monolingual classroom practices, especially in schools serving Sepedi-speaking learners. Compounding this issue is the inconsistent use of key terms such as ‘home language’, ‘first additional language’ and ‘African language’, which are either poorly defined, or used interchangeably across policies. Without consistent

definitions or instructional time allocations, teachers lack the curriculum knowledge necessary to plan and deliver coherent language instruction.

Theme 2: Gaps in reading requirements and instructional guidance

Policy documents outline five essential components of reading, namely phonemic awareness, word recognition, vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension. While these are listed in the Sepedi Home Language CAPS, National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase and the Sepedi National Reading Framework, none of the policies provide systematic guidance on how to teach these components. For example, although the Sepedi Home Language CAPS mentions shared, group-guided and paired reading, it does not explain how these methods should be implemented or sequenced for teaching Sepedi in the Foundation Phase. The National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African languages in the Foundation Phase recommends strategies such as teacher read-aloud (see Figure 1), but these are absent from the Sepedi Home Language CAPS, leading to further inconsistency.

The Sepedi National Reading Framework attempts to fill this gap by providing phonics teaching strategies and timelines (Table 1). However, this framework lacks clarity on the rationale behind the sequencing of letter sounds. There is no explanation of whether the order is informed by linguistic complexity, learner progression, or orthographic transparency. This weakens its practical utility and creates the risk of uneven instruction, where phonics may be taught without sufficient scaffolding or cohesion.

This gap in explicit instructional guidance reflects what Shulman (1986) calls ‘curriculum incoherence’, where teachers are expected to implement content without adequate pedagogical or sequencing support. The absence of curriculum-aligned pacing plans has been flagged in studies such as the DBE’s Early Grade Reading Study (2017) aun, which reported insufficient classroom time allocated for key strategies like group-guided reading,

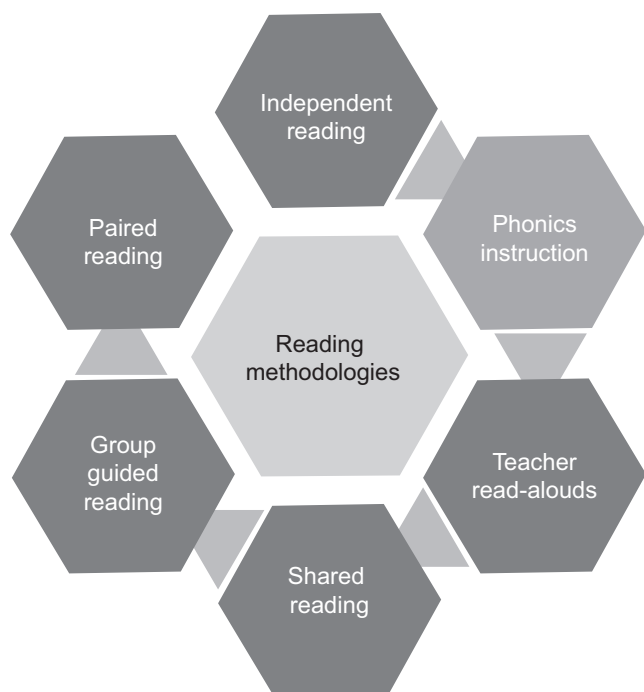


Figure 1: Reading methodologies (Source: The National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in the Foundation Phase, 2020: 81)

Table 1: *Leano la go ruta ditumatlhaka* (‘a strategy for teaching phonics’)

Beke (week)	Kotara ya 1 (Term 1)	Kotara ya 2 (Term 2)	Kotara ya 3 (Term 3)	Kotara ya 4 (Term 4)
1	<i>Medumo ya tikologo</i>	<i>poeletšo</i>	<i>poeletšo</i>	<i>poeletšo</i>
2	<i>Medumo ya tikologo</i>	u y	th tl	ee
3	e a	f d	th tl	ii
4	n b	h j	mm nn	bj
5	o l	w š	rw lw	mp
6	i m	ts tš	gw sw	nk
7	t s	ng hl	kw hw	nt
8	p k	ny kg	aa	<i>poeletšo</i>
9	g r	<i>poeletšo</i>	oo	<i>poeletšo</i>
10	<i>Poeletšo/ teko/ pego ya dipoelo</i>	<i>Poeletšo/ teko/ pego ya dipoelo</i>	<i>Poeletšo/ teko/ pego ya dipoelo</i>	<i>Poeletšo/ teko/ pego ya dipoelo</i>

Source: Sepedi National Reading Framework 2020: 14–15.

further limiting the development of reading fluency in African language classrooms.

A critical instructional requirement in early reading is the teaching of the sound system of the language. Of the five policy documents reviewed, only the Sepedi National Reading Framework Sepedi vowel (see Table 2) and consonant charts (see Table 3), phonics schedules and term-based progression (see Table 1) had these details. This is a significant strength, yet it stands alone. The Sepedi Home Language CAPS, LiEP and IIAL do not mention any phonics structure, and even the National Framework for the

Table 2: *Ditumanoši tša Sepedi* ('Sepedi vowel sounds')

Vertical position of tongue	<i>Pele</i>	<i>Magareng</i>	<i>Morago</i>
Godimo (top)	l		u
Magareng (middle)	e		o
Fase (below)	ê	a	ô

Source: Sepedi National Reading Framework 2020: 13

Table 3: *Medumotlhaka: Ditumammogo tša Sepedi* ('Sepedi consonant sound system')

<i>Tumammogo</i>	<i>Tumammogo pedi</i>	<i>Ditlhakatswana Kanywa</i>	<i>Ditlhakatswa Kanywa tše Kgethegilego</i>	<i>Ditlhakatswa Kanywa tše Kgethegilego</i>	<i>Tumammogo Nne</i>	<i>Tumammogo Hlano</i>	<i>Maadingwa</i>
(Single consonants)	(double consonants [digraphs])	(double consonants [blends])	(triple consonants [blends])	(triple consonants [blends])	(four consonants)	Five consonants	Borrowed sounds
n	ny ng	nk nt nw	ntl nts ntš nkg nth nkw ntw	ngw nyw	Ntsh ntšh ntlw ntsw nthw ntšw nngw nkgw ntlh	ntshw ntlhw	
b	bj						
l		lw					
m	my mp		Mps mph mpš		mpsh mpšh		
t	th tl ts tw			Tš tlw tlh Thw tsw tsh	tshw tšhw tlhw tšw tšh		
s	š	sw		šw			St-tstatamente
p	ph			psh	pšh		pr-profense praefete projeke
k	kh kg	kw		khw kgw			
g		gw					
r		rw					
y							
f	fs	fš					
d							
h	hl	hw		hlw			
j							
w							c-Coke q- Queenstown v-vuvuzela, Venda x-x-ray

Source: Sepedi National Reading Framework 2020: 13–14

Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase provides detailed phonics for isiXhosa, but not for Sepedi. Given Sepedi's transparent orthography and distinct disjunctive structure, this omission is significant.

The limited integration of Sepedi's linguistic structure in curriculum documents

The curriculum's neglect of Sepedi's unique orthographic system suggests a broader issue: the dominance of English in shaping reading pedagogy. As shown by Heugh, 2000; 2013), Plüddemann (2015) and McKinney (2017), the English CAPS curriculum has historically influenced the design of indigenous language curricula, resulting in policy documents that prioritise English methodologies over language-specific needs. Although mother-tongue instruction is strongly supported in principle, the implementation lacks the curriculum knowledge that would guide teachers in applying linguistically appropriate pedagogies for Sepedi.

This is further reinforced by the observation that reading instruction is often disconnected from language development in classrooms (Heugh, 2013). In the case of Sepedi, this disconnection is intensified by the failure of policies to distinguish between phonics and phonemic awareness and by the absence of structured guidance on how to teach them. While international research (Aro & Wimmer, 2003; Snow & Juel, 2005) affirms the value of both components for early reading, South African policy documents treat them inconsistently, if at all. Teachers are left without sufficient curriculum knowledge to adapt strategies to Sepedi's transparent orthography, which differs substantially from English's opaque and irregular structure (Probert & De Vos, 2016; Pretorius, 2019).

Although the Sepedi National Reading Framework outlines a term-based phonics teaching schedule, it lacks justification for its order of sound introduction and omits explanation for pedagogical choices. Without clarity, coherence, or linguistic scaffolding, the phonics plan risks becoming a checklist rather than a meaningful instructional guide. Research has shown that for phonics to be effective, it must be taught explicitly and systematically, with consideration of learners' language structures (Probert & de Vos, 2016).

The fragmented nature of South Africa's language education policies also extends to the availability of teaching and learning resources. Policies assume that reading materials are readily available, but reading resources in Sepedi remain scarce (Heugh, 2000; Edwards & Ngwaru, 2011; Potgieter & Anthonissen, 2017; Cekiso et al., 2019). Teachers are left to implement complex literacy expectations without access to aligned texts or instructional materials. This further constrains their curriculum knowledge by limiting opportunities to practise and reinforce the components of reading through appropriate materials.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the inability of Sepedi learners to achieve reading proficiency in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms could be affected, not by using home language instruction itself, but rather by policy misalignment, insufficient pedagogical guidance and a lack of systemic instructional support. While the principle of teaching in

African languages is widely affirmed in policy, the actual frameworks remain underdeveloped, disjointed and overly reliant on English models. From a curriculum knowledge standpoint, the critical gaps still missing in the policy include: (1) clear pedagogical sequences; (2) language-specific instructional strategies; and (3) coherent alignment across national documents.

If these gaps are not addressed, teachers will continue to struggle with fragmented curriculum guidance, learners will face delayed reading progress and Sepedi as a language of instruction will remain structurally disadvantaged. A shift toward language-specific curriculum planning, informed by the linguistic and cultural realities of African classrooms, is essential for improving early reading outcomes in Sepedi and other indigenous languages.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the critical gaps that language education policies must address to support effective reading instruction in Grade 1 Sepedi classrooms. Drawing on document analysis using content and thematic analysis of five national language education policies and guided by Shulman's (1986) concept of curriculum knowledge, the findings reveal that poor reading outcomes in Sepedi are not rooted in the use of mother tongue instruction, but rather in systemic gaps across the policy landscape.

The analysis identified three major policy-level challenges that undermine effective reading instruction in Sepedi. Firstly, there is the misalignment and contradiction among national language policies, particularly regarding multilingualism and instructional approaches. Secondly, the absence of detailed curriculum guidance for teaching the core components of reading phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension; and thirdly, the lack of integration between Sepedi's unique orthographic structure and pedagogical strategies in curriculum planning. These gaps point to a broader issue of underdeveloped curriculum knowledge in language education policies, which leaves teachers without the tools they need to plan, sequence and deliver instruction in linguistically appropriate ways.

The implications of these findings are significant. Policymakers and curriculum developers must prioritise the development of aligned and cohesive language education policies that provide structured guidance on reading instruction in indigenous languages. The current fragmentation between policies such as the Sepedi Home Language CAPS, IIAL, LiEP and the various national frameworks creates confusion and hinders implementation. A unified framework that integrates multilingual intentions with practical, language-specific instructional strategies is essential.

Furthermore, this study recommends increasing the explicit focus on curriculum knowledge in teacher training programmes. Teachers must be equipped not only with content knowledge, but with a deep understanding of how reading is taught, how instruction progresses over time and how linguistic features of languages like Sepedi influence reading development. This would help bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom practices.

The shortage of Sepedi reading materials also emerged as a major barrier. Government, educational publishers and teacher education institutions should collaborate to develop and distribute linguistically appropriate, structured resources for early reading instruction. These materials should reflect Sepedi's phonological and orthographic systems and support the systematic teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness. Increasing the time allocated to reading instruction in policies such as the Sepedi Home Language CAPS and the Sepedi National Reading Framework from 15 minutes to at least 25 minutes would support deeper engagement with foundational reading skills.

While this study offers key insights, its reliance on document analysis alone is a limitation. Future research should complement policy analysis with classroom-based investigations, including teacher interviews and lesson observations, to examine how curriculum knowledge is applied or absent in real teaching environments. A deeper understanding of how teachers interpret and implement policies would enrich the development of more responsive and effective reading instruction frameworks.

If unaddressed, the policy gaps highlighted in this study will continue to hinder Sepedi learners' reading development, particularly in under-resourced classrooms. Strengthening the alignment, clarity and linguistic relevance of language education policies is not only necessary for improving literacy outcomes, but is also critical for ensuring that indigenous African languages play a meaningful role in South Africa's educational future.

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Author contributions

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ORCiDs

Nombuyiselo Zondi: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0979-4778>
 Joyce West: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3916-9754>
 Keshni Bipath: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0588-9905>

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