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Assessing Fairly in Grade R: Home Language vs. English LOLT in ELOM-R Assessments

An investigation of ELOM-R Language and ELOM-R Mathematics performance when isiXhosa home language children are tested in isiXhosa and English

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Background

The ELOM-R (v1) is a standardised, CAPS-aligned assessment of Grade R children's Language and Mathematics skills, designed for population-level measurement. It has been standardised in eight South African languages, including isiXhosa and English.

In line with South African Language in Education Policy and established best practice, ELOM-R is typically administered in a child's home language. However, many African language-speaking children attend English Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) preschools and Grade R classes. By the end of Grade R, some children may have had multiple years of structured exposure to English instruction.

This raises a central question for fair and valid assessment:
Should African language-speaking children in English LOLT Grade R classes be assessed in their home language, or in English – the language of instruction?

A previous ELOM 4&5 study found that isiXhosa-speaking preschool children performed better when assessed in their home language. This 2025 study examines whether that pattern holds for older children assessed on the ELOM-R at the end of Grade R.

Research Questions

1. How does language of test administration affect performance on the ELOM-R Language and Mathematics Assessments?

2. Do isiXhosa home language children perform better in isiXhosa or English at the end of Grade R?

3. Does cumulative exposure to English LOLT predict performance in either language?

The Study

The ELOM-R Language and Mathematics Assessments were administered to isiXhosa home language children enrolled in English LOLT Grade R classes.

- **Language Assessment:** 61 children (mean age 73.7 months)
- **Mathematics Assessment:** 66 children (mean age 73.8 months)
- All children had completed nine months of English LOLT Grade R
- Over 90% had attended an English LOLT preschool

Children were randomly assigned to be tested first in either English or isiXhosa. Assessments were conducted approximately 13 days apart to control for sequence (practice) effects. Only children whose caregivers confirmed isiXhosa as both the primary household language and the language most often used with the child were included in analyses.

What did we find?

1. Scores were strongly related across languages

Performance in English and isiXhosa was highly and significantly correlated for both assessments. This means that children who performed well in one language tended to also perform well in the other language indicating strong cross-language consistency in underlying ability. For the Language Assessment, the correlation was strong ($r = .68$) and statistically significant ($p < .001$), and for the Mathematics Assessment it was even stronger ($r = .74$, $p < .001$), indicating a consistent and meaningful relationship rather than a chance finding.

2. Children performed marginally better in English

On the **Language Assessment**, children scored slightly higher in English (mean = .57, standard deviation = .17) than in isiXhosa (mean = .54, standard deviation = .14). This difference was statistically significant ($t(60) = 1.87$, $p = .033$), meaning it is unlikely to be due to chance. However, the effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .24$), indicating that the difference between the two languages was modest in practical terms.

Similarly,on the **Mathematics Assessment**, children performed slightly better when the test was administered in English[1] ($t = 1.870$ $p = .033$) and the effect size was comparably small (Cohen's $d = .21$), showing that, as with the Language Assessment, the practical difference between the two languages was modest.

[1] For home language administration, if children were more familiar with number and shape names in English than the vernacular as is common, the instruction protocols remained in home language but the terminology best known to the children was used.

3. English exposure did not independently predict performance

Regression analyses, which examine how different factors may predict or influence outcomes, were conducted to see whether children's performance was affected by their years of English instruction (in the ELP and Grade R), while controlling for their age and , sex, the number of days between tests, and the order of testing language (English or isiXhosa first or second). Years of English LOLT exposure did **not** significantly predict scores in either English or isiXhosa (all $p > .60$). This is likely due to the children having had very similar amounts of exposure to English language instruction in both their ELPs and Grade R histories.

4. Practice effects were evident

Regression analyses were conducted to examine how performance in one language predicted performance in the other. For Mathematics, the language administered first strongly predicted scores in the second language: when English was first, it predicted isiXhosa performance ($\beta = .676$, $p < .001$), and when isiXhosa was first, it predicted English performance ($\beta = .827$, $p < .001$).

For Language, performance in isiXhosa when tested first predicted subsequent performance in English ($\beta = .651$, $p < .001$) but not the other way around.

These findings indicate a clear practice effect: familiarity with the assessment format influenced second-administration scores, regardless of language.

Interpretation

These findings differ from the earlier preschool ELOM 4&5 study, where isiXhosa home language testing clearly produced stronger performance.

By the end of Grade R, children in this study had experienced substantial English exposure: over 90% had attended an English LOLT preschool and all had completed nine months in an English LOLT Grade R class. In this context, performance was marginally but consistently stronger in English across both Language and Mathematics assessments, although effect sizes were small.

This suggests that sustained English LOLT exposure may shift the balance of optimal assessment language by the end of Grade R, particularly where academic concepts have been introduced and reinforced in English.

However, the small magnitude of differences indicates that both languages produced broadly comparable estimates of ability.

Implications for Practice

1. **Language history matters.**
Assessment decisions should consider preschool attendance, duration of English LOLT exposure, and the child's most familiar home language.

2. **English assessment may be appropriate in some cases.**
For children with sustained English LOLT exposure, assessment in English may be valid – particularly where core literacy and numeracy concepts have been taught in English.

3. **Child preference should carry substantial weight.**
Children should be explicitly asked which language they would prefer to use during the assessment. That preference should be taken seriously.

By the end of Grade R, some children may feel more confident demonstrating their knowledge in English; others may remain more secure in their home language. Assessment conditions should maximise validity by ensuring the child feels linguistically comfortable. In other words, language of assessment decisions should not be determined by policy alone. They should reflect the child's exposure history and – critically – the child's own language preference.

Study Limitations

The study used a convenience sample drawn from schools that agreed to participate, limiting generalisability. Only isiXhosa-speaking children were included, and variation in English exposure was limited because most children had similar preschool and Grade R experiences. The quality of English LOLT instruction was not measured. Findings therefore apply primarily to isiXhosa-speaking children with substantial English LOLT exposure.

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