



Assessing Fairly: Home Language vs. Familiar Language in Early Learning Outcome Measures

An investigation of ELOM 4&5 performance when children are tested in their mother tongue vs the language of their preschool

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Background

A recent study conducted by Andrew Dawes, Linda Biersteker, Elizabeth Girdwood, and Colin Tredoux, investigated the performance of isiXhosa children attending English early learning programmes (ELPs) on the ELOM 4&5 when tested in both languages.

We undertook the study because many young children in South Africa are enrolled in ELPs that use a different language of learning and teaching (LOLT) from their mother tongue. In addition, many children may be exposed to and familiar with several languages at home and in their communities. As a result, a proportion of children in early learning programmes and in the Foundation Phase of school are likely to have what are known as *multilingual language repertoires*: some linguistic skills are likely to be more dominant than others as a function of their multilingual exposure in their homes and communities.

These observations raise the question: what language should be used when **assessing** the development of these children on tests such as ELOM 4&5? Clearly the decision influences the extent to which the assessment provides a fair indication of their abilities.

The problem

The language of assessment is a crucial issue for fair and reliable measurement of children's abilities. Following South African policy and the relevant evidence base, the ELOM 4&5, which has been standardised for use in 11 South African languages, has consistently been administered in the child's home language. However, many young children are enrolled in ELPs that use a different LOLT from their home language. This begs the question, in which language should a child whose home language is not English, but who attends an English LOLT early learning programme be assessed on the ELOM 4&5 to obtain the fairest measure of their ability? Our study sought to address this question.



The research question: *How does language of test administration affect children's performance on the ELOM 4&5.*

How this study answers the research question: by comparing how children perform on the ELOM 4&5 when the test is given in their home language, isiXhosa, versus the language used in their early learning programme, English. We hoped the answer would provide guidance on an appropriate approach to language of assessment on the ELOM 4&5.

The study

The ELOM 4&5 was administered to 85 isiXhosa-speaking children (39 boys and 46 girls)¹ attending English LOLT ELPs. Their average age was 62.12 months. Children were randomly assigned to be tested first in English or isiXhosa at an average of 22.61 days apart. This counterbalanced design enabled us to check whether being tested first in one of the languages affected performance in the other. The sample by test language order is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample by Test Language Order

Language Order	N	%
English Administration First	47	55.3%
isiXhosa Administration First	38	44.7%

In our analyses we investigated predictors of the ELOM 4&5 Total score when assessed in each of these languages on the second occasion. Predictors included the ELOM 4&5 total score in the language assessed at time 1, the time between assessments, sex, age in months, and assessor ratings of task orientation (the child's ability to focus and engage in the tasks during the assessment).

What did we find?

- 1. Home language testing produces a valid indicator of children's abilities.** This study of children who had attended an English LOLT ELP confirms that administration of the ELOM 4&5 in the isiXhosa home language produced consistently better performance regardless of whether the English or isiXhosa version was administered first.
- 2. Children's Task Orientation scores** (how focused, interested and attentive they were during testing) **only predicted their overall ELOM 4&5 results when they were tested in English.** One possible reason is that doing the test in a less familiar language made it harder, so children had to concentrate more and pay closer attention.
- 3. There is no indication from this study that children who have spent nine months in English LOLT ELPs should be assessed in English.** Further research is required to confirm whether more years of English LOLT exposure would produce different results.
- 4. Young children should be assessed on the ELOM 4&5 in their home language.** isiXhosa home language children attending English LOLT ELPs performed better on the ELOM 4&5 in isiXhosa regardless of language of administration order.

¹ Teacher and practitioner are used interchangeably; referring to the adult who teaches the class of children aged 3 - 5 years.

Take home



ELOM 4&5 test scores of isiXhosa-speaking children in English LOLT ELPs are likely to be more valid indicators of their ability when children are tested in isiXhosa (their home language).

Further research is needed to investigate whether the amount of time children spend in an English LOLT ELP makes a difference to their performance in each language.

The study has answered our question for children in isiXhosa language households but what about those who are raised in multi-lingual families and communities where there may not be a dominant 'home language'? While more research is needed on these multilingual contexts to inform guidance on language of assessment, there are some guidelines that can be followed to determine the most appropriate language of assessment. If the child's main caregiver (e.g. mother) is available, we recommend asking which languages are spoken at home with the child, and if more than one, ask which is spoken most often on an everyday basis. The answer would likely indicate the child's most familiar language and hence the most appropriate language in which to conduct the assessment. In the absence of the caregiver or another member of the household who knows the child well, the ELP educator would be the key informant on the child's home language.

At the point of ELOM 4&5 administration, children should be the final arbiters. They should always be asked which language they would prefer to use during the assessment and be told that they can switch to another language should they wish to do so.

If you are interested in reading the full study with detailed analyses, please keep an eye out for upcoming journal publication.

