

Language in education policies and practices among the isiXhosa speaking population of South Africa

by Birgit Brock-Utne and Zubeida Desai

The beginning of a Norwegian-South Africa research co-operation

The first time the authors of this paper met was at the 1999 Oxford conference on Education and Development in a session on the role of African languages in education. Zubeida Desai (1999) gave examples from her research in South African class-rooms whilst Birgit Brock-Utne, who gave one of the key-note speeches at that conference (Brock-Utne 1999, 2001) in a joint session with Desai gave examples from her research, her experiences as a supervisor of Tanzanian student teachers and the research of her students in Tanzanian secondary schools (Brock-Utne 2000). Our experiences had very much in common. We agreed on the type of research needed in African classrooms and what type of research was *not* needed.

The type of research we thought was *not* needed was the kind consisting of questionnaires or interviews of students and teachers about the language of instruction they would prefer. We knew the answers. The majority of teachers and students would say that they prefer the so-called “international” (in this case English) language to continue as the language of instruction. They will say this even though they can hardly understand what is being said and are unable to express themselves in English. They would mix up the issues of wanting to learn a foreign language and having that language as the language of instruction.

We agreed that types of studies needed were those that showed the actual competence of students in the language of instruction. Other, and even more important types of studies, would be those which, on an experimental basis, showed the results students would obtain if they were allowed to study in the language they normally speak. The LOITASA

(Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa) and LOISA (Language of Instruction in South Africa) projects which we designed gave us an opportunity to embark on the last type of study. The LOTASA project also involved Tanzanian colleagues. The funding for this project started on the 1.1.2002 and its first phase ran until 31.12. 2006. The LOISA project was running from 1.1.2003 until 31.12.2005.

The LOISA project

The LOISA research project was funded through a joint grant from HSRC (Human Science Research Council) in South Africa and NRC (Norwegian Research Council) in Norway. The project has been closely connected to the LOITASA project. The LOITASA project has been and is funded by NUFU (Norwegian Universities Committee for Development, Research and Education) and has got a renewed contract for the years 2007 through 2011. The first phase of LOITASA ended with a conference in Norway called Languages and Education in Africa (LEA 2006), a co-operation between five NUFU funded projects at the University of Oslo, all dealing with languages and education in Africa. LEA 2006 greeted 200 participants, 100 of whom were Africans. All the five key-note speakers were Africans. The key-note speeches and 15 out of the 67 papers presented at the conference will soon appear in a book edited after the conference (Brock-Utne and Skattum (eds.) 2008). The combined LOISA and LOITASA projects have produced four edited books (Brock-Utne et.al 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006), a DVD and video, four doctoral theses – two from Tanzania and two from South Africa (two more are under way), three master theses from South Africa (Biseth 2006, Olson 2006, Sigcau 2004), twelve master theses from Tanzania and several articles in professional journals and chapters in books. . The LOITASA project involves experimental situations where a language more familiar to the students (Kiswahili in Tanzania and isiXhosa in South Africa) has been used for an extended period of time and results measured against students having English as the language of instruction. The LOISA project built on the LOITASA design but concentrated on South Africa. Before these projects started Brock-Utne had secured funding for an NRC (Norwegian Research Council) project dealing with the first part of LOITASA – that is describing the language policy and analysing the

communication patterns of teachers and pupils in Tanzania and South Africa. That project started on the 1.1.2001 and ran until 31.12 2005.

Research co-operation between South African and Norwegian researchers

The funding from the programme has certainly contributed to initiate and further develop research co-operation between South African and Norwegian institutions and researchers. Without this funding it would actually not have been possible to carry out the LOITASA project the way it was designed. The funding made it possible for us to produce learning materials in isiXhosa for the learners in the experimental classes. The reports we have show that the production of these materials maybe has been the most successful part of the project. Parents have grabbed the textbooks of the children and seen that they could read easily. Science has been brought to them in the language they speak. It is not easy to try to promote a language in which there is hardly any written material apart from some religious texts. The learners have been able to learn better since they could understand the subject matter which came to them in a familiar language. The parents have also been able to help their children with their homework. The funding of the LOISA project has made it possible for the two main researchers in South Africa to spend two writing periods at the University of Oslo.

It has also paid for a sabbatical period for our isiXhosa speaking colleague Vuyokazi Nomlomo which has resulted in a doctoral thesis. Nomlomo (2007) received her doctorate from the University of Western Cape on the 19th of September 2007 and the Norwegian project leader was present on the occasion. Brock-Utne was also one of the three external examiners of the doctoral thesis and spent a week in Cape Town reading thoroughly, commenting and advising Vuyokazi. The synergetic effects of LOISA, LOITASA and the NRC funded project have also made it possible for the doctoral student Halla Holmarsdottir (2005) to spend a couple of years at the University of Western Cape and take her doctorate closely linked to our project. When she took her doctorate et the University of Oslo in December 2005 Zubeida Desai came from Cape Town at the expense of the University of Oslo to be the second opponent. Two other students studying in the M.phil. programme in comparative and international education at

the University of Oslo of which Brock-Utne is the Director Jennifer Olson (2006) and Heidi Biseth (2006) have done their field-work in South Africa and participated in LOISA workshops.

Some results from the LOISA project

Most of the results of the LOISA project have been written up in chapters in the four LOITASA books (Brock-Utne et.al 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006). A DVD and video from the project have also been produced. In the following we shall just illuminate our joint research through some examples. It is, however, necessary first to give some background information about the language in education policies in South Africa generally and in the township schools where we are working specifically.

Language in education policies in South Africa

The change in the language policy of South Africa which came with the new Constitution in 1996 (Republic of South Africa 1996) meant an increase in the number of recognized official languages from two to eleven (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004, Nomlomo 2003). The South African Constitution has a better protection for the African languages than the Tanzanian one. In an effort to eliminate the domination of one language group by another, the drafters of the South Africa's Constitution decided to make eleven of the country's major languages equal and official. Thus, according to section 6 (1), the South Africa's Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996) states:

- I. The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

The Constitution further imposes a positive duty upon the state in subsection 2:

Recognizing the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.

To this end, there is a provision in subsection 5 for the creation of the Pan South African Language Board to “promote and create conditions for the development and use of”

- i. all official languages;

- ii. the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
- iii. sign language

In 1995 this board became a reality as a result of the Pan South African Language Board Act 59 of 1995 with the swearing in of the first members in April 1996 for a period of five years (PANSALB 2000).

The introduction in South Africa of eleven official languages has received international support as the most revolutionary and democratic provision in education on an African soil (e.g., Bamgbose 2000, Smitherman, 2000). Makelela (2005) writes that locally the language policy sparked hope among the disenfranchised masses who were caught up in the politicization of languages of instruction for decades of English and Afrikaans domination, on the one hand, and deliberate subjugation of African language varieties, on the other hand. He sees a sour irony in the fact that necessary conditions for practicability of teaching in an indigenous African language beyond grade 4 were not put in place (see Heugh 2002, Kamwangamalu 2001, Makoni, 2003). Instead, the elite and a growing number of educated Black parents send their children to private English medium schools as early as the kindergarten age. To this effect, their practice negates the very constitutional commitments to a development of multilingual policy and the potential use of African languages as the media of learning (Makelela 1999). This gravitation toward the English ONLY medium is increasingly becoming a norm in linguistically plural South Africa. According to Makelela (2005) it inevitably fulfils recommendations of the English Academy of Southern Africa¹ The actual code selection is, however, left to the particular schools concerned as shown in the Language-in-Education policy document of 1997 (DoE, 1997):

Subject to any law dealing with language-in-education and the constitutional rights of learners, in determining the language policy of the school, the governing body must stipulate how the school will promote multilingualism through using more than one language of learning and teaching, and/or by offering additional

¹ The English Academy of South Africa made two major recommendations to inform language policy decision for South Africa in 1992 as follows:

- a. that English should be the main official language of South Africa, and
- b. that the official standard of English in South Africa should be standard British English.

languages as fully-fledged subjects, and/or applying special immersion or language maintenance programmes (DoE, 1997:8).

that English should be the main official language in the new political dispensation (see Webb, 1996).

Some South African based researchers like Neville Alexander (1989, 2000), Kwesi Kwaa Prah (2005) and Leketi Makelela (2005) have pointed to the fact that the nine African languages chosen were actually the languages of the Bantustans and so the language policy follows in the footsteps of the apartheid regime. Makelela illuminates what he calls “the artificiality of ‘multilingualism’”, a phenomenon which has unfortunately not been addressed in the present constitutional provisions (Act 108 of 1996). He writes that the democratization of South Africa in 1994 provided an opportunity for linguistic reform, but in reality the acceptance of nine indigenous language varieties as distinct languages, plus Afrikaans and English further strengthened language balkanization that was carried out by the early missionary linguists. He notes that the 2001 Census masked important details relevant to unification of language varieties. It concealed that Nguni language varieties (isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati and isiNdebele) constitute an overwhelming 45.71% while Sotho varieties (Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho) make up 25.52% of the total number of speakers. Further, the census did not show that these languages are also spoken as second languages by large sections of the society across ethnic lines. It might have been a more progressive move to have harmonized some of the written forms of some of the languages to have created fewer written languages (a Sotho and a Nguni language) but languages which could have been used as media of instruction through both primary, secondary and tertiary education.

The choice of language of instruction in the township schools

Despite what may be regarded as a very progressive language in education policy, which in principle enables learners or their guardians to choose the language of instruction, English is used as the medium of instruction from grade 4 onwards. The transition to English is, however, only a policy decided by individual schools and reflects the actual 1979 apartheid language policy. When one reads the official government policy carefully,

one sees that this policy does *not* state that a change of language of instruction needs to take place in the fourth or fifth grade in primary school or, for that matter, at all. According to this policy the whole of primary school as well as secondary school could be conducted in African languages as the languages of instruction.

The current South African Language-in-Education Policy suggests that learners and/or their parents have a right to choose the language of learning and teaching through the school governing bodies where the parents are supposed to be important members. This is what the policy actually says:

Subject to any law dealing with language-in-education and the constitutional rights of learners, in determining the language policy of the school, the governing body must stipulate how the school will promote multilingualism through using more than one language of learning and teaching, and/or by offering additional languages as fully-fledged subjects, and/or applying special immersion or language maintenance programmes (Department of Education 1997:8).

Even though the school guidelines are liberating **and** try to avoid top-down dictated policy Makelela points out that there are fundamental problems that allow schools not to choose African languages. First, choice of one's own language is restricted to the majority of the children speaking African languages because text books and other supporting materials are not available beyond grade 4. Materials in former official languages, English and Afrikaans, are, however, abundantly available for choice of any of them to be made. The whole idea of 'choice' is, therefore, circumstantially curtailed, leaving school governing bodies in predominantly African schools to "prefer" English to Afrikaans due to the negative association of Afrikaans with Apartheid. Makelela (2005) writes that because the schools for African language speakers are also poorly resourced, it is evident that the choice is often for better resources, not for language instruction per se. This we found was certainly true in the township schools in western Cape where we conducted the LOISA project.

The majority of parents, especially the Black working class parents, are not aware that there is a language policy that guides teaching and learning in their children's schools.

They are also ignorant of their rights in the education of their children. The lack of interaction between teachers and parents does not affect the teaching and learning process only in terms of parental support, but has implications for the school's policy formulation and implementation.

Apart from the parents' ignorance about language policy issues and their children's education rights, the findings of the interviews that were conducted with parents of Zama Primary School² show that there is no regular communication between the school and the parents, and as a result, the parents do not have sufficient knowledge of what is happening in schools in terms of policies that govern teaching and learning (Biseth 2005, Nomlomo 2004, 2005, 2007). This article shows how the parents with children at Zama Primary School were involved in choosing the language to be used to teach science from Grade 4 to Grade 6. The discussion highlights the various reasons that influenced parents to choose either English or isiXhosa as a medium of instruction for their children from Grade 4 to Grade 6 (Intermediate Phase). The parents' responses reveal that the parents are caught between the high status of English as a means of socio-economic mobility on the one hand, and the cognitive and cultural benefits of isiXhosa as a home language on the other hand.

Learning from each other – joint academic writing – the cartoon story

One of our co-operative tasks has been a study which was first undertaken in South Africa and later replicated in Tanzania. The idea for this study came from Zubeida Desai. In October 1998³ she administered three written tasks to two classes of isiXhosa-speaking Grade 4 and Grade 7 students. The purpose of administering the three different writing tasks was to explore the students' proficiencies in both English and isiXhosa in order to see whether they had greater proficiency in their primary language, isiXhosa or

² Zama is not the real name of the school. It is used to keep the school anonymous. It is where the LOITASA Project was conducted from 2003 to 2005.

³ October is more or less the end of the school academic year in South Africa and just before the final examinations, so the pupils' performance is a fairly good reflection of what they are capable of at the end of Grade 4 (after a year's exposure to English as a medium) and at the end of Grade 7 (after 4 years of English medium)

not. The tasks administered were assessed on the basis of criteria developed by Zubeida and triangulated by a reference group set up for the purpose. The first task was a narrative task based on a set of pictures in an envelope provided to students. They had to arrange the pictures sequentially, then write two stories, one in isiXhosa and one in English, based on the six pictures. The two versions were not written on the same day. The one class in each grade wrote the isiXhosa story first, whilst the other wrote the English story first. There was a day between each version.

Being fascinated by the narrative task, and the results coming out of the study, Birgit Brock-Utne decided to make a follow-up of the cartoon story in Tanzania. She was able to recruit two Tanzanian master's students as research assistants for this job. They used the same cartoon story as Desai had used as part of the empirical work on their master's theses. Another Tanzanian student made a similar study in Zanzibar, using a different cartoon. Based on these studies we wrote a joint paper which we first presented at the 2003 Oxford conference (Brock-Utne and Desai 2003) and later as a chapter in a book we co-edited with our Tanzanian colleague (Brock-Utne and Desai 2005). Our joint publications on this topic relate some rather telling examples first from South Africa, then from Tanzania and make some comparisons at the end. This work has been further analyzed in an article by Brock-Utne (2007b).

School X where Desai first conducted her research with Grade 4 and Grade 7 students is situated in Khayelitsha, a sprawling African township just beyond Cape Town International Airport. This is the area where most of the LOISA research has taken place. The population is predominantly isiXhosa-speaking. The students all have isiXhosa as their home language. So do their teachers. According to the Deputy Principal the same position prevails in all the other classes. Despite this linguistic composition at School X and the environment in which it is located, the school decided in 1995 to bring forward the introduction of English as a medium from Grade 5 to Grade 4. The reason given to Desai by the Deputy Principal and the teachers for this step was the fact that parents were taking their children out of African township schools and sending them to the formerly coloured schools because they wanted them to use English as a language of instruction

earlier. School X did not want to lose its quota of teachers through low pupil enrolments and therefore decided to introduce English as a medium earlier. This means that officially students would have to do all their written work in English from Grade 4 onwards, except during the isiXhosa subject classes.

The decision to focus on written tasks was deliberate. Much of the research on language in education in African classrooms has tended to focus on oral interaction in the classroom with a particular focus on the kind of language used by both teachers and learners. These researchers would then comment on the fact that very little, if any, English was used in the classrooms and would come to the conclusion that the medium was actually an African language rather than English. The kind of English language used in the classroom, however, only emerges when it comes to literacy practices (if that is the most appropriate word to describe what happens in such classrooms) – the texts available in class and the written work by both teachers and learners are and are required to be in English only. As we have also seen in the LOISA project (especially Nomlomo 2007) it is customary for teachers in the township schools to teach predominantly in the relevant African language, then write notes in English on the board which are directly extracted from the subject-particular textbook. The learners dutifully copy these notes into their books. If any subject adviser or inspector or parent were to examine the learners' books, they would see the requisite English required by the language policy. It is precisely for this reason that we deliberately chose to examine writing tasks because learners are generally assessed on their writing abilities, and in the case of the schools chosen in the South African as well as the Tanzanian cases, their ability to write in English, specifically.

Zubeida Desai decided to start off with a fairly simple task, not content-subject based, as she thought it might reflect more accurately learners' current levels of proficiency in isiXhosa and English. Pupils in both Grades 4 and 7 were given a set of six pictures in an envelope. They had to arrange the pictures in such a way that they told a story. Pupils were then asked to write a story, first in isiXhosa and then in English based on the six

pictures. The task was translated into isiXhosa by an isiXhosa-speaking colleague of Desai's who accompanied her to the school on the day the pupils were given the task

We here want to show you some of the learners' scripts in both English and isiXhosa. The isiXhosa-speaking colleague made a literal translation of the isiXhosa stories into English to highlight the contrast in proficiency in the two languages. Punctuation and capitalization were largely absent from the isiXhosa version as well, but these have been inserted into the literal translation for easier reading.

As the samples below show, the English stories of the Grade 4 pupils were largely incomprehensible and often not even linked to the pictures, whilst the isiXhosa version was much more clearly expressed. This was the case with all the scripts. Although the English used by the Grade 7 learners was markedly better, it still did not compare favourably with their isiXhosa. On being asked in isiXhosa how they experienced the task, all pupils said that they enjoyed the task but simply did not have the proficiency in English to express themselves clearly. We have here chosen two scripts randomly from the pile of Grade 4 scripts and two from the Grade 7 scripts to illustrate the point made above about learners' proficiencies in isiXhosa and in English. For the Grade 4 scripts we will start off with giving the first example also in the isiXhosa version, followed by the literal translation from isiXhosa into English, and then the English version. For the next example from Grade 4 and for the examples in Grade 7 we only give the literal translation from isiXhosa into English, and then the English version.

Sample 1- Grade 4

Written in IsiXhosa

Kwakukho utata waza wabeka ibhokisi yakhe phantsi encokola notata wakhe kwasukha kwathi gqi omnye ubhuti wathatha ibhoks yala tata wabaleka waleqwa ngumntwana omnye wakhalisa impempe omnye emkhemba wabaleka wayo kuqabela imoto wayiqhuba kakhulu abanye bavula ibhokisi kwavela inyoka wathuswa yinyoka kwade kwathaka idimasi..

Literal translation from IsiXhosa

There was a father (old man) who put his box down, conversing with his father. Then a certain young man (brother) appeared and took that old man's box and ran away. He was chased by a child and the one blew a whistle, and the other one pointed at him. He ran away with it and got into the car and drove very fast. The others opened the box and a big snake. The other was shocked by the snake and his sunglasses fell down.

Written in English

Once upon a time

Long long ago

Ly Buter uteatsha fourboy late my father

I taket my tyesi

I goiu my father is goiu boeke

Look my boy

Sample 2 - Grade 4**Literal translation from IsiXhosa**

There was a young man (brother) and a child who went to an airport. When they arrived there was a father (old man) who was carrying a basket. The child talked to this father while the young man took the basket. They ran away with it. He called a policeman. The policeman didn't hear him. They went away with it. They opened it and a big snake appeared. The young man was shocked. The sunglasses fell down. The child was also shocked.

Written in English

Father going to kwaling my playiner

Brother spiking noFather tike manty

Going noy spiking Police open manty ckinkr

Big snaiking jump hat leleng dimes

Stop The Story

Sample 3 – Grade 7

Literal translation from IsiXhosa:

There was an old man who was going with his friend. This old man looked like a thief. There was a man who had put his suitcases down, one behind and the other one next to him. This man was looking at a distance, thinking. The short friend of this thief deceived this man by talking to him, while the other one took the suitcase. He ran away and the other one also ran. Then this man shouted, calling them and they ran very fast. The security officer appeared - blowing a whistle.

They ran to the car with this box while the owner of the box was pointing at them. They drove the car and put it next to the trees, and they got out of the car. They put it down and opened it, and a big snake appeared. The sunglasses fell off their eyes, and the hats were blown up. They thought that it was money.

Written in English:

The farther they still handle with great care new town zoo. And MR Alisingh they a stand and thinking. And this father they take this handle and MR Alisingh they talk and son. And this farther they take this handle and the go away. And this farther and this son they running fast and security they see. And this farther and this son they go away and his car. They outside of this car they put down this handle and see this is a snake.

Sample 4 – Grade 7

Literal translation from IsiXhosa:

There was an old man who had put his basket and bag. down

- 1) He was with one old man and one child.
- 2) This old man had put his things down and spoke to that child. Now that old man who was going with that child took the old man's basket who is speaking with that child.
- 3) There is a policeman who was on duty and the old man who was showing that policeman blew the whistle.
- 4) They drove a car and chased him.

- 5) That old man who was showing that policeman raised his two hands. The man and that child stood next to the airport.
- 6) When they were opening the basket they saw a very big snake. That old man and that child were shocked. They cried. The hat and spectacles of the old man were taken off.

Written in English:

They was fathers and the boy father and boy.

- 1) take the bag and martji
- 2) This father talk the boy father take the bag we go to airport.
- 3) Father and boy we running and take the bag.
- 4) This police we talk pepar they father and boy we running.
- 5) Police and father cotin side the car the car working te spid.
- 6) Father and boy sit down the you see the bag father and boy open the bag you see the snake we going father and boy.

Some comments on the samples

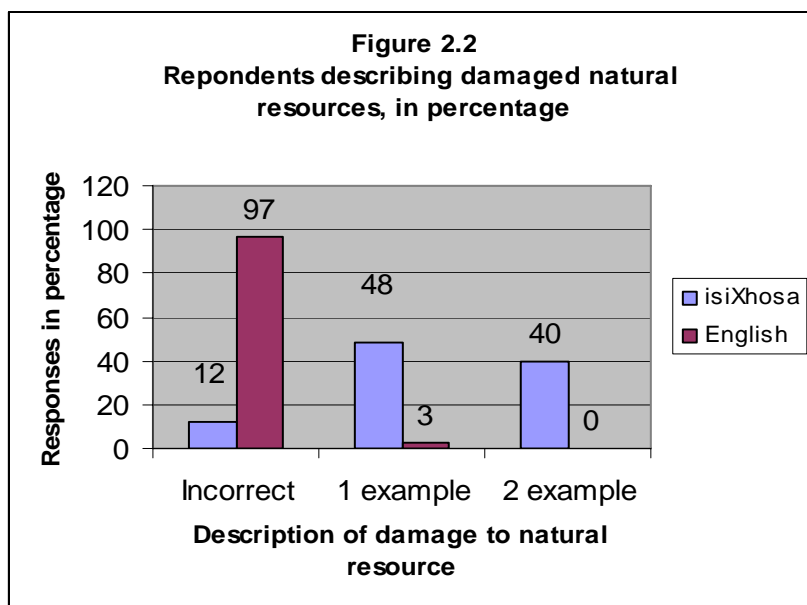
When it comes to the isiXhosa version we see that the learners are able to reflect what is happening in the pictures fairly accurately. Their sentences are complex. In Grade 7 learners are also writing more. There is evidence of good vocabulary. There are very few grammatical and spelling errors.

When it comes to the English version, however, we see that the learners are struggling to express themselves in English in Grade 4. Sample 1 has very little bearing on the pictures. The 'story' aspect is completely lost in the English version. Spelling and grammatical errors abound. Sentences are generally very short. Samples show learners' difficulty in forming sentences. Although there is an improvement in Grade 7, the learners' proficiency is nowhere near the requirements for using it as sole medium of instruction.

Understanding of science concepts

As part of the LOISA project Keith Langenhoven (2006) looked at the understanding of science concepts among grade 6 learners who had been taught in English and grade 6 learners who had been taught in isiXhosa. The classes were found in the township school we have called Zarma, one of the schools participating in our project. The following question was chosen for coding and analysis because it lends itself to expressions of learning competence through writing. The question was taken verbatim from the workbook that teachers used when teaching Grade 6: Module 1: Ecosystems and Environmental Balance: The Influence of Humans on the Ecosystem.

Here we look at the answers to the following question: Describe TWO natural resources that have been exploited (damaged) by humans. The results are reflected in the graph below.



Source: Langenhoven 2006: 262

We see that 88% (22/25) of the isiXhosa taught pupils were able to write down one or two examples of natural resources that have been exploited (damaged) by humans. They wrote in isiXhosa, their mother tongue. They wrote in an understandable way. It was evident from their answers that the concept of damage to natural resources had been well understood. The English taught pupils were extremely weak in writing about this concept

in English. Thirty out of thirty-one students (97%) gave incorrect answers. Langenhoven (2006: 262) comments: “This result is shocking and raises many questions about education policy and its outcomes”. He gives some examples which illustrate some of the weak responses received when learners are forced to write in English..

Pupil 1: It say they bring death at our home but they don't.

Pupil 2: Sheep we damage them by killing them, after all we took them to the fire we make meat by them.

Pupil 3: Fungi and bacteria they stay in the bread. They damage in the bread, people do not eat the bread.

Pupil 4: The frog that we are the amphibian that are living organisms. This frog he live in a forest because is living thing. The frog that we have damages the forest. We have their damages of the frog that are.

Pupils are unable to understand the question asked because they do not understand what they read. They write about things that appear to have been rote-learned. The perception is that any writing about science is acceptable. This writing ranges from personal experiences to snatches of classroom teaching and learning experiences. The writing also reveals misunderstanding of definitive animal characteristics and definitive habitats.

Current and planned cooperation between the principal researchers

We unfortunately did not get funding for another round of LOISA, for a project we had called LOISAN (Language of Instruction in South Africa and Norway). That project would have been more symmetric than LOISA has been since some of the research would be carried out in Norway. We here wanted to study the educational effects of reintroducing the Sami language as language of instruction for learners of Sami origin. We had already made contacts with Sami educationists in Kautokeino and they were excited to learn about our work with the reintroduction of isiXhosa as language of instruction in the townships around Cape Town. Our cooperation continues, however,

through the LOITASA project which will be funded until 2012. One doctoral student from Norway, Greta Gudmundsdottir, spent the first part of 2007 in Cape Town gathering data for her doctoral thesis on ICT, language and social class.

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