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Home language and English language ability in South Africa: Insights from new data

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Abstract: In this paper we analyse data on language ability collected in a new nationally representative household survey, the National Income Dynamics Study, which captures information on reading and writing ability, both in the individual's home language and in English. Two main findings are that self-assessed reading and writing ability are highly correlated in the data, and that individuals typically report considerably higher ability in their home language than in English. The data also suggest large racial differences in language skills, in the individual's home language and particularly in English. Racial differences however are narrower among younger adults (aged 15 to 30 years) than among older adults. Furthermore, whereas older women are less likely than older men to report being able to read and write very well, in both their home language and in English, this is reversed among younger women and men. Finally, individuals who report good reading and writing ability in their home language are far more likely to report good reading and writing ability in English.

Introduction

The 1990s witnessed a dramatic increase in the availability of socio-economic data in South Africa on the characteristics of individuals and the households in which they live. Since 1993, many household surveys have been conducted which provided detailed information on the demographic characteristics of South Africans, who they live with, their access to income and their expenditure patterns. However, there has been little focus on collecting information on the linguistic characteristics of individuals. South Africa is a multi-lingual society, with many South Africans being able to speak, read and write in more than one language, although at different levels of ability. The Population Censuses of 1996 (Central Statistical Service) and 2001 (Statistics South Africa), as well as some of the nationally representative household surveys that have been conducted since 1993, asked individuals to identify the 'language most often spoken at home'. Some of the surveys also asked whether or not individuals can read and write in at least one (unspecified) language. However, no information was collected to determine linguistic ability in the individual's home language as well as in other languages.

In 2008, a new household survey was conducted, the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS). This nationally representative survey collected socio-economic information on approximately 7 300 households (or 28 000 individuals), including information on how well individuals reported being able to read and write both in their home language and in English. In this article, we analyse and evaluate these data.

In the next section, we discuss the various ways in which language ability is defined in the literature, we briefly review what data have been collected on language proficiency and literacy in South Africa and we outline broad findings from a range of studies undertaken. We then discuss how information on language ability has been collected in NIDS, highlighting concerns with the self-assessment of individual language skills. The focus of our study is on describing responses to home language and English language ability in the NIDS survey, investigating the distribution of self-assessed language ability by race, age and gender, as well as the relationship between reported ability in the individual's home language and in English.

Language proficiency in South Africa

There is no general, universally accepted definition of concepts such as 'language proficiency', 'language skills', or 'knowledge of language'. In theoretical linguistics, the latter term is usually understood as being synonymous with Chomsky's (1965) notion of 'linguistic competence'. Linguistic competence is the native speaker's (tacit) knowledge of the grammar of his/her language, which allows the individual to produce and understand a theoretically unlimited number of sentences. Since humans are genetically predisposed to acquire language, Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence implies that every (normal) individual is fully competent in at least one language.

Hymes (1972) introduces the concept of 'communicative competence', which encompasses both linguistic competence in Chomsky's sense and a sociolinguistic dimension, i.e. the capacity for appropriate contextualised use of language in a particular discourse situation. The concept of communicative competence has played an important role in research on L2 (second language) acquisition and language teaching as well as in the development and use of language proficiency measures (cf. Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990).

Cummins (1979, 1980) distinguishes between two different kinds of language proficiencies, basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP). While BICS include accent, oral fluency and sociolinguistic competence (and can therefore be considered as equivalent to the concept of communicative competence), CALP refers to the ability to understand and produce the more complex written and oral language of academic discourse. Cummins' (1979, 1980) interdependence hypothesis states that L1 (first language) and L2 CALP are closely related and that the development of CALP in a second language is in part determined by the speaker's level of CALP in the first language at the time when instruction in L2 begins. In later work, Cummins (2001) introduces a third type of language proficiency, discrete language skills, which encompass rule-governed aspects of language, such as phonological and grammatical knowledge, as well as basic (as opposed to advanced academic) reading and writing skills.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies in South Africa which offer national or nationally representative data on proficiency in more than one language. As noted in the introduction, the 1996 and 2001 Population Censuses (Central Statistical Service, 1996; Statistics South Africa, 2001), as well as some of the nationally representative household surveys conducted by Statistics South Africa, provide information about the language 'most often' or 'usually' spoken at home. Some of these surveys also collected information about self-assessed proficiency by asking individuals whether they can read, and whether they can write 'in at least one language'. However, these questions do not specify the language in which the speaker is proficient, nor do they distinguish between different levels of proficiency. Furthermore, the surveys did not collect information on whether individuals are proficient in more than one language.

There have been various studies conducted in South Africa which examine language proficiency within smaller groups of speakers, but the results of these studies vary widely, depending on the size and composition of the sample, when and how the study was conducted, which data were available at the time, and what kind of language proficiency was assessed.

Webb (2002) discusses a study of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) from the early 1990s, reported in Van Vuuren and Maree (1994), which distinguishes between four levels of proficiency ('no understanding', 'up to basic level', 'up to intermediate level', and 'up to complex level'). Competency in a language was measured by assessing how well respondents, whose proper understanding required different levels proficiency, were able to provide appropriate answers to three questions. According to Webb (2002), the study found that 47% of South Africans are proficient in English up to a complex level, while 31% have no understanding of English. However, Webb (2002) notes a variety of problems with the SABC study, of which the most serious is that it did not involve participants from rural communities. Consequently, its findings cannot be generalised to the entire population. Moreover, the study was conducted before the first democratic elections in 1994, and the results therefore do not capture developments in the post-apartheid period.

The Western Cape Language Audit 2001 (Western Cape Language Committee, 2002) presents data on the language proficiency of senior officials and personnel of the Western Cape Provincial Administration and of the general public. The language proficiency of the Administration was

measured on the basis of initial self-assessments, followed by checks carried out by fieldworkers. The audit found that among employees in the Administration, '[a]t least two-thirds of Afrikaans and English-speakers can be regarded as fully adequate (proficient) in spoken Afrikaans and English' and that '[n]early 60% of isiXhosa-speakers are proficient in English' (Western Cape Language Committee, 2002: 13). However, these findings are based on a highly selective sample, given that proficiency in two of the three official languages of the Western Cape (English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa) is considered a job requirement in the Provincial Administration. For its findings regarding the general public, the Western Cape Language Audit distinguishes between three levels of proficiency, namely whether speakers are able to understand, to read a newspaper article, or to explain a problem in a language. The audit reports that 80% of isiXhosa-speakers can understand English and 20% can understand Afrikaans. Approximately 50% of isiXhosa-speakers can explain a problem in English.

Deumert *et al*. (2005) report the results of the Monash Survey of Internal Migration to Cape Town, conducted in 2004 in the Western Cape, which was based on interviews with 215 household heads and the evaluation of 754 questionnaires. The sample consisted of mainly isiXhosa-speaking rural-urban migrants 'with a high degree of social and economic deprivation' (Deumert *et al*., 2005: 308). Among other things, participants in the study were asked to assess their proficiency in English according to six categories ('very high', 'high', 'average', 'low', 'very low', and 'no knowledge'). The study found that the self-assessed proficiency of their participants was very high: 89.1% of adult household members reported that they can 'speak' English, and more than 60% of the participants described their proficiency in English as 'average' or higher. However, on the basis of conversations and interviews with some of the participants who classified their proficiency as 'average' or 'high', Deumert *et al*. (2005) conclude that self-assessed levels of proficiency are mostly over-estimated and that the language skills of those participants who report average or high proficiency in English are often less than basic. As a more realistic measure of proficiency, Deumert *et al*. (2005: 310) quote the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) sociolinguistic survey (2000), which reports that 'more than 40% of people in South Africa often do not, or seldom, understand what is being communicated in English' (PanSALB, 2000: 13).

Other studies of language proficiency in South Africa have focused specifically on literacy and academic proficiency levels. The 1996 LANGTAG (Language Plan Task Group) report defines (functional) literacy as corresponding to a Grade 7 (Standard 5) level of schooling and accordingly puts the adult illiteracy rate in South Africa at 29% (Webb, 2002: 90). Weideman and Van Rensburg (2002) discuss the results of the ELSA Plus test (English Language Skills Assessment for the tertiary environment) conducted by the Unit for the Development of Language Skills at the University of Pretoria. In 2002, when this test was applied to 1 098 first-year students in the Faculty of Humanities, 26% of the students were identified as having academic proficiency levels in English below Grade 10 (which is considered the minimum level required for successful education at a university where English is the language of teaching and learning).

Most studies therefore suggest that language proficiency and literacy skills, particularly in English, are low among South Africans. However, because of differences between the surveys regarding sample size, sample composition and type of language proficiency assessed, it is not possible to generalise the results to arrive at a representative conclusion for South Africa.

In the following sections, we evaluate and discuss data from a new survey, which provides information about South Africans' self-assessed reading and writing skills in their home language and in English. Since our main goal is to describe, rather than to interpret, this information with respect to demographic variables such as race, age and gender, we use the term 'language ability' (which we regard as neutral with respect to the different types of language proficiencies discussed above) to refer to these self-assessed language skills. Only when we discuss the relationship between home language and English language ability do we use the term 'language proficiency', which we then define as the self-assessed ability to both read *and* write 'very well' in that language. We assume that this definition of proficiency captures at least those individuals with 'discrete language skills' in Cummins' (2001) terms, although the group of speakers who report being able

to read and write very well in a language most certainly also includes individuals who are academically literate.

Information on language ability collected in the National Income Dynamics Study, 2008

In 2008, a new nationally representative household survey for South Africa was conducted, the National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS). NIDS is designed as a household panel survey which will track approximately 28 000 individuals in just over 7 300 households at two-year intervals. In 2009, the first wave of NIDS was released by the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit.

In NIDS, as in the Population Census, individuals are asked to identify their home language, although the question is framed slightly differently: individuals are asked what language they 'usually speak at home' rather than what language they 'speak most often at home'. Table 1 describes home language reported in NIDS for all adults. The distribution of home language is comparable to that derived from the 2001 Population Census (Statistics South Africa, 2001). Over 97% of African adults (aged 15 years and older) report their home language as one of the nine official African languages. In contrast, among coloured, Indian and white adults, 96 to 98% report their home language as being either Afrikaans or English.[1]

A distinguishing characteristic of NIDS is that it is the first national survey also to capture information on language ability in reading and writing both in the individual's home language and in English. This information is collected only for adults (aged 15 years and older) who are resident members of a household.[2] In the survey, adults are asked to self-assess how well they can read and write in their home language and in English in two sets of questions. Response options are provided on a four-point scale of 'very well', 'fair', 'not well' and 'not at all' (Questions H36 to H39 in the NIDS Adult Questionnaire).

Data qualifications

Many Indian adults surveyed in NIDS did not provide consistent responses to the initial question on which language 'do you usually speak at home' (Question B3 in the Adult Questionnaire), and the questions asked later in the survey on how well individuals could read and write in their 'home language' and in English. The majority of Indians reported that they most often spoke English at home. However, their responses for their self-assessed ability in their home language and in English are not aligned. It appears that in reporting on ability in their home language, these Indian respondents interpreted their 'home language' differently to the language they 'usually speak at home', and in particular, it is likely that they interpreted their home language as their ancestral Indian language (e.g. Hindi, Tamil, and so on).[3] For purposes of consistency, we recoded the responses to home

Table 1: Home language spoken among South Africans (15 years and older) (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

	African	Coloured	Indian	White
IsiNdebele	1.7	0.2	0.1	0.0
IsiXhosa	22.8	0.9	0.9	0.0
IsiZulu	29.4	1.1	2.0	0.1
Sepedi	13.1	0.1	0.0	0.2
Sesotho	12.3	0.1	0.4	0.0
Setswana	9.6	0.6	0.0	0.7
SiSwati	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Tshivenda	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Xitsonga	3.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Afrikaans	0.8	70.1	4.1	58.1
English	1.0	26.7	91.5	40.0
Other	0.6	0.2	1.1	0.9
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates[4]

language ability to reflect the responses to English language ability among all Indians who reported English as the language usually spoken at home.

The key concern with the data collected on language ability in NIDS is that individuals are asked to self-assess their ability. Given the number of households surveyed, together with the wide range of areas covered in the NIDS questionnaire, the reliance on self-assessment (rather than on administered tests) is not surprising. However, several studies have documented that with self-assessment, individuals are likely to over-report their language ability, leading to an upward bias in the data (cf. De Bot, 1992; Deumert *et al*., 2005).

Levels of home language and English language ability therefore may be over-estimated in NIDS. Moreover, if English language proficiency conveys a certain social status, then over-reporting may be high particularly on English language ability. It is also possible that individuals may assess their language ability relative to that of individuals in their community, leading to possible over-reporting particularly in communities in which levels of English language proficiency are generally low (see also Deumert *et al*., 2005).

Notwithstanding these concerns, the data show consistency in individual responses across questions. As Table 2 illustrates, there is a large overlap between self-assessed ability in reading and writing. Percentages in bold, reported in the diagonals of the table, identify the share of individuals who reported the same level of ability in writing as they did in reading. For example, 98% of all adults who reported being able to read very well in their home language also reported being able to write very well in their home language. As we would expect, the extent of the overlap is also greatest for the highest (very well) and lowest (not at all) categories of assessment.

Where self-assessed levels of reading and writing ability in English differ, adults are more likely to report lower levels of ability in writing than in reading. This can be identified by comparing the percentages to the right of the bold diagonals in Table 2 (second set of rows) with those to the left. For example, among all adults who reported their reading ability in English as fair, 5.5% assessed their writing ability as being lower than fair, compared to 2.7% who reported a higher writing ability. This is not an unexpected result, given that it is generally easier to *understand* written text in a language in which one is not fully proficient than to *produce* writing in that language. In contrast, writing abilities are not reported as being less developed than reading abilities in the home language, and there are no large inconsistencies (for example, adults reporting either a very good reading ability and no writing ability, or conversely no reading ability and a very good writing ability).

Self-assessed reading and writing ability in home language and in English

In Table 3, we describe population estimates, derived from NIDS 2008, of self-assessed ability in reading and writing in the individual's home language. The table shows that over 80% of adults,

Table 2: The relationship between self-assessed ability in reading and writing (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

		Writing in home language			
Reading in home language	Very well	Fair	Not well	Not at all	**Total**
Very well	**98.0**	1.5	0.4	0.1	100.0
Fair	7.4	**87.4**	3.9	1.3	100.0
Not well	2.1	8.2	**83.7**	6.0	100.0
Not at all	0.0	0.9	4.1	**95.0**	100.0
		Writing in English			
Reading in English	Very well	Fair	Not well	Not at all	**Total**
Very well	**96.3**	3.1	0.6	0.1	100.0
Fair	2.7	**91.7**	5.1	0.4	100.0
Not well	0.2	3.8	**90.5**	5.6	100.0
Not at all	0.1	0.3	1.8	**97.8**	100.0

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates

across all race groups, reported being able to read and to write in their home language at a level of 'very well' or 'fair'. To provide some basis for comparison with these data, we also report statistics in Table 4 which are generated from a nationally representative household survey, the Labour Force Survey (LFS), conducted in 2007 (Statistics South Africa, 2007). This survey of approximately 30 000 households asked individuals, in two separate questions, whether they could read, and whether they could write, in at least one language (although not how well). The language is not specified in the questions, but it seems plausible that respondents would have reported on their reading and writing ability in their home language.

A comparison of Tables 3 and 4 shows that, if being able to read and write in a language corresponds to a self-assessed ability that is at least 'fair', then the NIDS data are closely aligned to the literacy data captured in 2007. For example, in 2008, 82.4% of African adults assessed their reading ability as being fair or better. In the LFS in 2007 (Statistics South Africa, 2007), 87.6% of African adults reported that they could read in a language.[5] In fact, if literacy is defined as language ability which is self-assessed as being at least fair, then literacy levels are lower in NIDS than in the LFS, and particularly among adults who are not white.

In Table 5, we describe self-assessed English language ability among adults in NIDS. We would expect that across all race groups, a larger percentage would report a good ability in their home language than in English. This is the case for Africans, coloureds and whites, for whom the majority do not report English as the language most often spoken at home. Among Indians, however, a slightly larger percentage assessed their English language abilities, in comparison to their home language abilities, as very well, even after the data reported in Tables 5 and 6 had been recoded to remove the observed inconsistencies regarding home language and English language ability discussed earlier. This is because there is a small group of Indians who reported an African language as the language usually spoken at home and who reported their English language ability as being higher than their home language ability. This highlights the phenomenon that in a multi-lingual society, the language an individual usually or most often speaks at home is not necessarily the individual's mother tongue.

Table 3: Self-assessed reading and writing ability in home language among adults (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

	African	Coloured	Indian	White	All adults
			Reading ability		
Very well	61.9	69.0	82.0	95.0	66.4
Fair	20.5	20.6	9.9	3.8	18.5
Not well	8.6	5.0	4.6	0.5	7.4
Not at all	9.0	5.4	3.5	0.7	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
			Writing ability		
Very well	62.4	67.2	82.0	94.8	66.7
Fair	19.5	21.8	11.7	3.4	17.9
Not well	8.6	5.3	2.6	1.5	7.4
Not at all	9.5	5.7	3.7	0.2	8.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Adults are aged 15 years and older

Table 4: Reported literacy levels among adults (own calculations based on Statistics South Africa, 2007: 2)

Percentage who report being able to:	African	Coloured	Indian	White	All adults
Read	87.6	93.0	98.5	99.4	89.5
Write	87.3	93.0	98.3	99.4	89.3

Notes: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Adults are aged 15 years and older

Table 5: Self-assessed reading and writing ability in English among adults (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

	African	Coloured	Indian	White	All adults
			Reading ability		
Very well	42.3	48.4	84.5	83.3	48.2
Fair	25.8	24.8	9.0	13.7	24.0
Not well	14.2	16.1	2.2	1.8	12.8
Not at all	17.7	10.7	4.3	1.2	15.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
			Writing ability		
Very well	41.3	47.7	84.4	81.0	47.1
Fair	25.6	25.0	9.6	15.1	24.0
Not well	14.8	16.3	1.5	2.7	13.4
Not at all	18.3	11.0	4.5	1.2	15.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Adults are aged 15 years and older

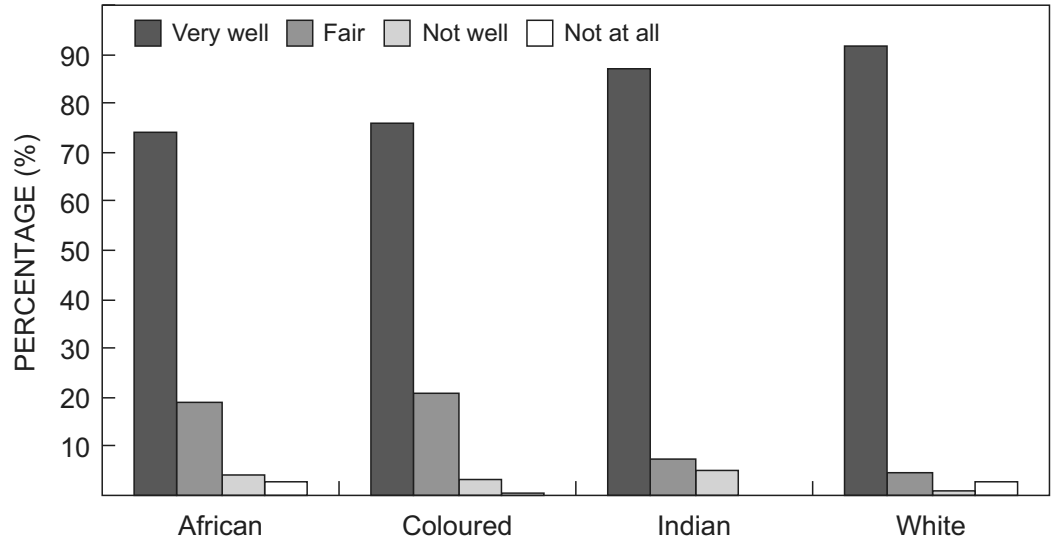
A striking feature of the tables presented is the large racial gap in self-assessed language ability. African and coloured adults are far less likely than Indian and white adults to assess their reading and writing abilities in their home language as being at least fair. The difference is even more pronounced for self-assessed English language ability. Whereas 42.3% and 48.4% of African and coloured adults respectively reported being able to read very well in English, the corresponding percentages for Indian and white adults are 84.5% and 83.3%.

Differences across race, however, are considerably narrower among a younger age cohort than an older cohort. We illustrate this in Figures 1 and 2, which compare reported ability in reading in the home language among younger adults, aged 15 to 30 years, and among adults older than 30 years. The gap in reading very well among younger African and white adults is less than 20 percentage points, whereas it is more than 40 percentage points among older adults.

For all race groups except whites, home language reading ability is reported as being higher among younger cohorts than among older cohorts. Among whites, however, a slightly larger proportion of adults older than 30 reported being able to read in their home language ‘very well’, compared to adults aged 15 to 30 years.

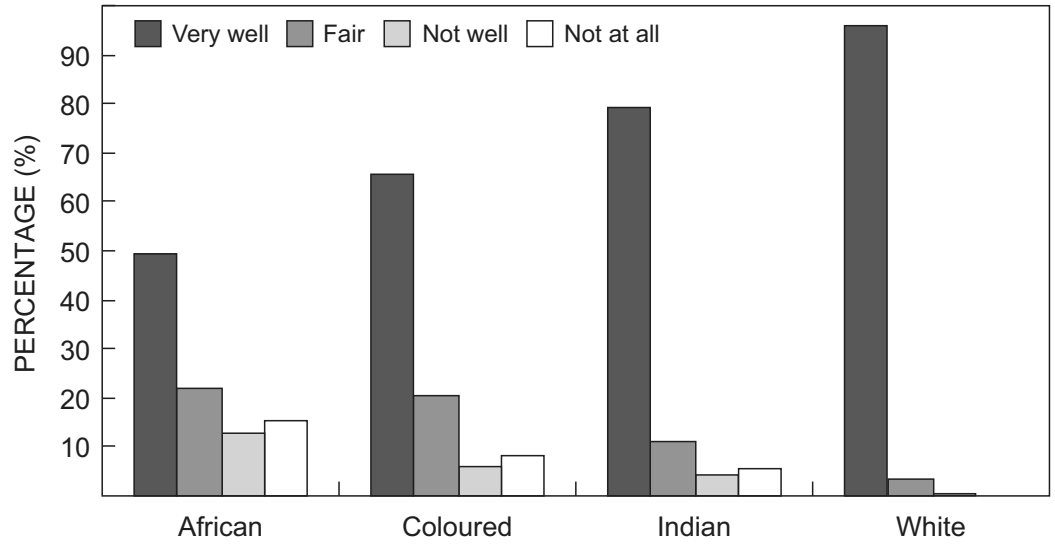
Differences in home language ability by age cohort are largest among Africans, a pattern which is mirrored in results for English language ability. Figure 3 illustrates that African adults aged 15 to 30 years are almost twice as likely as older African adults to report reading very well in English; and whereas only five per cent of young adults reported not being able to read in English at all, almost 31% of older adults reported no ability to read in English. These differences may reflect a systematic bias in reporting by age cohort, where younger cohorts are more likely than older cohorts to over-report their language ability. However, the data would also be consistent with socio-economic changes since the ending of apartheid.

The NIDS data also suggest interesting differences in home and English language ability by gender and age cohort. Self-assessed labour ability is higher among older men than older women, but this is reversed among younger men and women. This is illustrated in Table 6, which compares reading ability in home language and in English among younger men and women, and among older men and women. For all adults aged 15 to 30, a larger share of women than men assessed that they could read ‘very well’ in their home language. For example, whereas 80% of young coloured women reported that they could read very well in their home language, only 70% of young coloured men provided the same assessment. Among older adults, however, this pattern is reversed, particularly among Africans and Indians. It seems very unlikely that younger women are systematically more likely than younger men to over-estimate their language ability, while the reverse would hold true for older men and women. Rather, the data points to progress



Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates

Figure 1: Self-assessed reading ability in home language, adults aged 15 to 30 (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008).

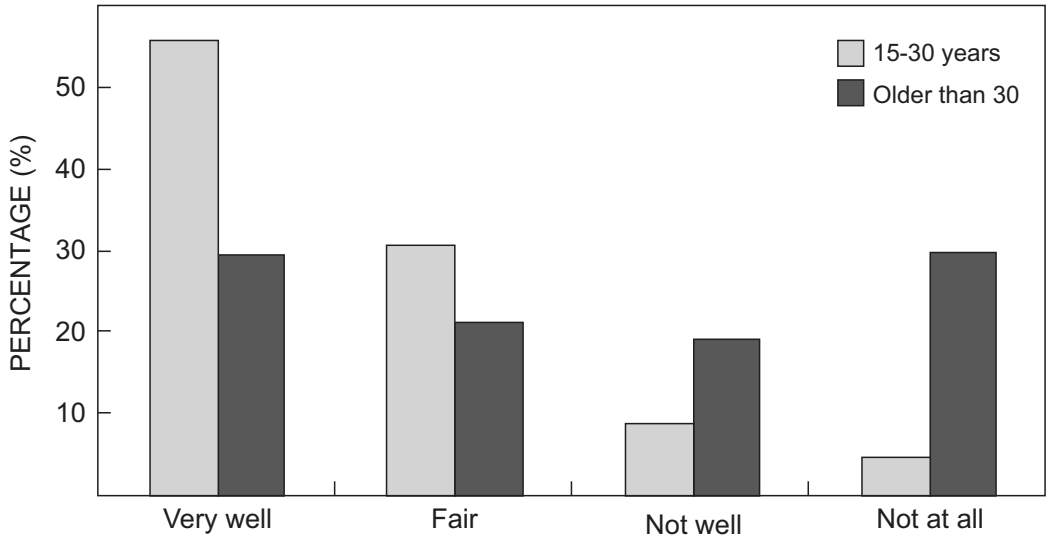


Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates

Figure 2: Self-assessed reading ability in home language, adults older than 30 years (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

in redressing gender inequalities and increasing opportunities for women in education in recent decades.

There is mostly a similar set of patterns for English language ability, reported in Table 7. Young women are more likely than young men to assess their reading ability in English as high, whereas the opposite appears for older women and men. For example, 59% of young African women reported that they could read very well in English compared to 52% of young African men. In contrast, 53% of older African men and 47% of older African women assessed their reading ability in English as being high.



Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates

Figure 3: Self-assessed reading ability in English among African adults aged 15 years and older (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

Table 6: Self-assessed reading ability in home language by gender (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
	Men	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**
				Adults aged 15 to 30				
Very well	74.3	75.7	69.9	80.0	84.0	90.0	84.8	97.0
Fair	18.9	18.7	25.0	17.7	16.0	0.3	8.8	1.3
Not well	4.3	3.7	4.7	1.9	0.0	9.7	1.3	0.8
Not at all	2.5	1.9	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.0	5.1	0.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
				Adults older than 30				
Very well	53.2	46.9	65.6	65.2	83.2	75.7	96.6	95.4
Fair	21.2	22.7	21.5	19.8	13.2	9.7	3.4	3.7
Not well	12.1	13.4	5.7	6.4	2.4	5.6	0.0	0.6
Not at all	13.4	16.9	7.2	8.6	1.2	9.0	0.0	0.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates

The relationship between home language and English language ability

In a final set of tabulations, we compare the relationship between home language and English language ability. This relationship has particular resonance in the context of language policy in education in South Africa. The post-apartheid government has adopted what is viewed to be a progressive Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP), which allows individual schools (through the School Governing Bodies) to decide on the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) (Probyn *et al*., 2002; Webb, 2002; Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004). The policy encourages (but does not require) schools to maintain the learners' home language(s) at the same time as they learn an additional language. This approach is based on the concept of additive bilingualism, developed in theories of second language acquisition, which suggest that the best way for learners to gain an understanding of concepts generally and second language skills in particular is through a thorough grounding in the learner's home language, alongside learning in English (cf. Cummins, 1980; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Heugh, 1999; Probyn *et al.*, 2002; Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004). African mother-tongue

education in South Africa, however, has been tainted by its association with the policies of apartheid. Consequently, many schools in which the majority of learners are African home language or mother-tongue speakers have maintained the use of English as the LoLT from at least Grade 4.

To explore the relationship between home language and English language ability, we combine information on reading and writing ability to generate a binary variable which captures language proficiency. Because of concerns with over-reporting, we define individuals as being 'proficient' in a language only if they report being able to both read and write very well in the language. Table 8 reports home language and English language proficiency among all adults, and by race. Based on our definition of proficiency, the NIDS data suggest that approximately 65% of adults in South Africa are home language proficient whereas only 47% are English language proficient. Both home language and English language proficiency are lowest among African adults.

In Figure 4 we compare English language proficiency among African adults according to whether or not they are identified as being proficient in their home language. The figure shows that individuals are far more likely to be identified as English language proficient if they are also proficient in their home language. Among African adults who report that they can read and write very well in their home language, over 60% also report reading and writing very well in English. In contrast, among those who are not identified as home language proficient, only 8% report that they can both read and write very well in English. The finding that home language proficiency is strongly related to English language proficiency is consistent with the arguments of additive bilingualism, and warrants investigation in future analysis of the data.

Conclusion

The analysis of the NIDS household survey data presented in this paper suggests that approximately 65% of all South African adults, and almost 61% of all African adults, are proficient (can read and write

Table 7: Self-assessed reading ability in English by gender (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

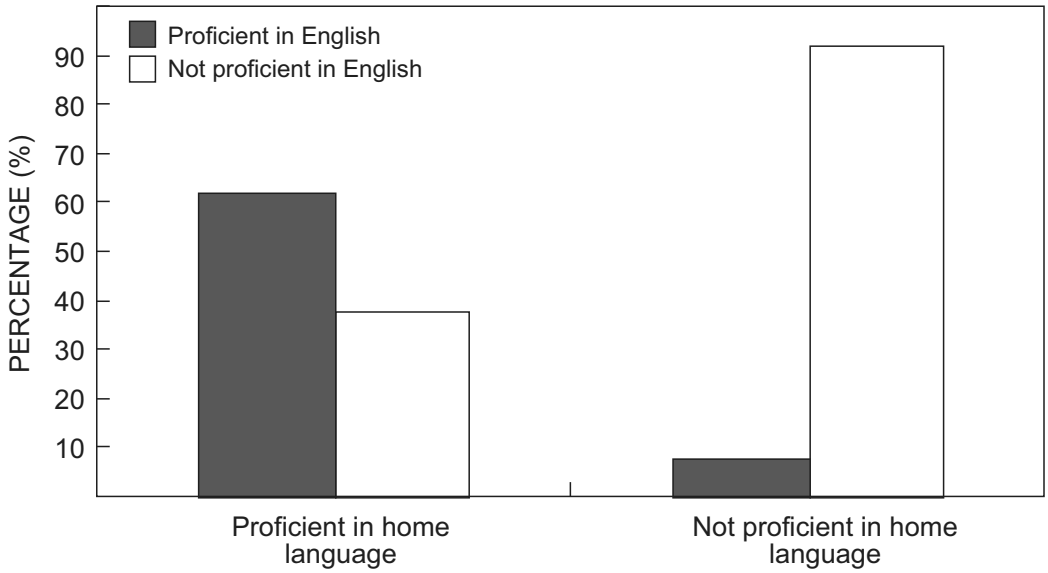
	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
	Men	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**
				Adults aged 15 to 30				
Very well	52.0	59.4	54.9	53.6	84.0	96.7	72.5	85.8
Fair	32.4	28.9	30.5	32.4	16.0	0.0	20.4	13.4
Not well	9.4	8.3	11.4	11.7	0.0	3.3	2.3	0.0
Not at all	6.2	3.3	3.2	2.3	0.0	0.0	4.8	0.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
				Adults older than 30				
Very well	53.2	46.9	65.6	65.2	83.2	75.7	96.6	95.4
Fair	21.2	22.7	21.5	19.8	13.2	9.7	3.4	3.7
Not well	12.1	13.4	5.7	6.4	2.4	5.6	0.0	0.6
Not at all	13.4	16.9	7.3	8.6	1.2	9.0	0.0	0.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates

Table 8: Home language and English language proficiency among adults (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

Percentage who are:	**African**	**Coloured**	**Indian**	**White**	**All adults**
Home language proficient	60.7	66.5	82.0	94.2	65.2
English language proficient	40.6	47.0	84.4	80.7	46.6

Notes: The data have been weighted to represent population estimates. Proficiency is defined here as the self-assessed ability to both read and write very well in the language



Note: Proficiency is defined here as the self-assessed ability to both read and write very well in the language

Figure 4: English language proficiency in relation to home language proficiency among African adults (own calculations based on NIDS, 2008)

'very well') in their home language. The corresponding percentages for English language proficiency are approximately 47% of all South African adults, and 41% of all African adults. Our findings therefore fall within the range of results of smaller and more regionally specific studies regarding functional literacy and English language proficiency in South Africa. The NIDS data also display consistent patterns in the reporting on reading and writing ability. Furthermore, the data produce plausible distributions of home language and English language ability across race and other demographic groups, distributions that would be expected given the nature of South Africa's history. We believe therefore that the data in NIDS provide a useful resource for describing relative differences in language ability in the country. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that individuals are likely to over-report or over-estimate their language ability. The inclusion of a regular language proficiency test in a subsequent wave of the NIDS survey, alongside questions of self-assessed language ability, would make it possible to explore more comprehensively the extent and distribution of over-reporting on language ability.

Notes

[1] In the 2001 Population Census (Statistics South Africa, 2001), almost 98% of African adults reported an African language as their home language and between 94 and 98% of coloured, Indian and white adults reported either English or Afrikaans as their home language (own calculations).

[2] Information in NIDS is collected separately for adults and for children. Questions on language ability were included only in the adult questionnaire.

[3] This has also been observed in research by Broeder *et al*. (2002: 18), who note that 'many Indians [in South Africa], who are in fact first-language speakers of English and who have no proficiency in an Indian language, still view an Indian language as their 'mother tongue' or their 'first language''.

[4] Nationally representative survey data are converted into population estimates using population weights. The weights for the NIDS data were provided by the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit.

[5] The percentages of all South Africans (including children) who reported being able to read and to write in at least one language are considerably lower than the percentages for adults specifically. In the LFS (Statistics South Africa, 2007: 2), 71.7% and 71.6% of all South Africans reported being able to read and to write in at least one language respectively.

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