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Pre-service Teachers' Experiences of Learning Sesotho Content and Pedagogical Modules

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Abstract. Teaching African languages at South African universities focuses on developing content and pedagogical knowledge (PCK). However, studies revealed a misalignment between content and pedagogy during pre-service teachers' training. Although various studies on teacher education have been documented, very few have focused on highlighting gaps between the content and pedagogical modules taught during teacher education training. Hence, this study aimed to explore the student teachers' experiences of learning Sesotho Home Language (HL) content and pedagogical modules in one higher education institution. The framework guiding this study was the sociocultural theory. A qualitative research approach was used to conduct focus group interviews with groups of 1st- and 2nd-year pre-service teachers and 3rd- and 4th-year pre-service teachers at the University of Free State. The students were sampled purposefully based on their enrolment in Sesotho HL modules. The data collected was analyzed thematically. Findings revealed challenges of limited language proficiency, curriculum mismatch, lack of teaching and learning resources, and unclear module guides, which might have contributed to curriculum misalignment between Sesotho HL content and pedagogical modules. The findings also showed that PCK inadequately prepared students to acquire the skills required to teach Sesotho HL at the school level. Thus, what student teachers are taught at the content level may not align with what is offered at the pedagogical level, with implications for the quality of Sesotho teaching and learning at the school level. Therefore, it is recommended that the curricula for both content and pedagogy in Sesotho HL modules be revisited in consultation with relevant stakeholders to address this misalignment and promote quality education in African Indigenous languages. Additionally, student teachers should be supported to overcome the challenges mentioned above.

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1. Introduction

The primary goal of higher education institutions across Africa, including South Africa, is to equip student teachers with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to teach African languages effectively in public and private schools. In the context of South African universities, all nine officially recognized African languages (e.g., isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiSwati, isiNdebele, Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga) are taught as modules to prepare student teachers for teaching these languages (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015) at the school level alongside English or Afrikaans as the first additional language. The training student teachers are offered at the university level requires deep knowledge and understanding of both content (what of teaching) and pedagogy (*how* of teaching) for effective teaching in the classroom after completing their studies (Mafa-Theledi, 2024).

However, there is a misalignment between *what* student teachers are taught at the content level and *how* they are trained to teach language at the pedagogical level. This is supported by Phillips and Condy (2023), who established a misalignment between how student teachers are trained and what they face in the classroom at the school level. Hence, graduate teachers produced under these circumstances tend to have limited content and pedagogical knowledge required to teach home languages in schools (Kanandjebo, 2024; Phillips & Condy, 2023). Thus, according to Mupa and Chinooneka (2015), this may likely contribute to ineffective teaching and learning in the classroom.

Studies by Khetoa and Motsei (2021). Mokala et al. (2022) and Motsei (2023) in teacher education have been conducted, but very little, if any, have focused on highlighting gaps existing between what is taught for the content and pedagogy when training student teachers for teaching the Sesotho home language. This study filled a gap by exploring student teachers' experiences of learning Sesotho home language content and pedagogical modules at a South African higher education institution.

This aim was addressed by the following question:

What are pre-service teachers' experiences of learning Sesotho home language modules at the content and pedagogical levels in the higher education institution?

Data from this study were drawn from doctoral research that aimed to explore what is taught in Sesotho home language at the content level in the Faculty of Humanities and at the pedagogical level in the Faculty of Education at the same university. The present paper first reviews the literature on teacher education challenges in higher education institutions and then incorporates the theoretical lens used to anchor the current study. Thereafter, the methodology for collecting and analyzing the data is described. Next, the data collected from the student teachers enrolled in the Faculties of Humanities (where content is taught at the 1st and 2nd-year levels) and Education (where pedagogy is taught at the 3rd and 4th-

year levels) are presented and discussed. Lastly, the concluding thoughts are highlighted. It should be noted that the terms 'pre-service teacher' and 'student teacher' are used interchangeably throughout the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Limited Language Proficiency

Language proficiency refers to the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms (Cloud, 2000). Mahabeer (2003) argues that proficiency in all language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in a particular language is crucial to cognitive development and can significantly impact academic performance. However, research on teacher education highlighted that although students manage to complete their basic education (Grade R-12) and enrol in HEIs (van der Merwe, 2018) to further their studies, this does not mean that their language proficiency in their mother tongue or English as their First Additional Language is acquired or learned sufficiently to help them engage effectively with content. Hence, Brandt et al. (2023), in a study examining pre-service teachers' ability to identify academic language features, raised serious concerns about whether future educators will be able to meet the needs of their multilingual classroom contexts. Hence, students are less likely to perform to the best of their ability if they are unable to use their mother tongue or home language (Owen, 2010).

2.2 Curriculum Mismatch

Curriculum mismatch refers to a gap between what is offered to students in the classroom and the skills needed by personnel at the industrial level (Moletsane, 2020). Research across various fields has shown a significant mismatch between curricula and industry skill demands, suggesting that the knowledge and skills acquired in Higher Education Institutions may not be sufficiently competitive for graduates to be employable. For example, a study examining the mismatch between the skills taught to students and industry skill demands in the Province of Camarines Norte found a significant difference between the skills taught and the skills sought in the food industry (Balada & Lo, 2024). Similarly, Moletsane (2020) also revealed that students lack the skills needed and, to a certain extent, possess skills below expectations. In Higher Education Institutions, misalignment between curriculum and assessment practices has been identified, consequently impairing students' ability to engage meaningfully in learning and succeed academically (Bull, 2025).

In the context of the current study, a curriculum mismatch is evident between the content and pedagogical levels of Sesotho modules. Although noted at the school level, a study that investigated the alignment of intended and implemented curricula of A-Level Biology through interviewing teachers revealed misalignment between the intended curriculum and how it was implemented, which seemed to be the result of teachers lacking knowledge of engaging and understanding the curriculum (Phaeton & Stears, 2017). Interestingly, another study investigating the influence of content mastery and pedagogical training found that pre-service teachers' levels of content knowledge, pedagogical training, and classroom preparedness were highly commendable (Suelo & Caloc,

2025). This makes one wonder what is happening in classrooms where the curriculum is often misaligned with what is taught to students.

2.3 Accessibility of Learning Materials

The ability to easily access a range of learning materials enhances students' learning experiences in higher education (Naz et al., 2024). However, scholars highlight the challenges of limited access to teaching and learning materials developed in African languages (Mello, 2023). A study investigating the integration of Indigenous languages into teaching and learning practices in South African primary schools found that a lack of instructional materials in African languages hindered their effective integration (Omarsaib, 2025). Efforts in terms of developing the status of African languages and promoting their usage, as per the South African Language in Education Policy, are in place, given that the government has ensured that these languages are offered as media of instruction in the foundation phase and also used for teaching, learning, and research in Higher Education Institutions to promote their scholarship.

However, native speakers of these languages seem less interested in contributing to their language's development. For example, a study that explored the experiences of the development of an African Indigenous language (IsiNdebele) scientific register for natural sciences revealed that there are people who are still advocating for English as the medium of instruction against the academic usage of African Indigenous languages, which have the opportunity of developing if materials in these languages can be produced (Ntuli & Mudau, 2025). However, if the perception highlighted above persists, the chance of survival for the African Indigenous languages might be very limited.

2.4 Lack of Clarity in Module Guides

A module guide is a document that outlines all the learning units to be covered in the module throughout the year. It gives students a visual overview of what to expect throughout the module (University of Free State, n.d.). This document is normally designed by the module leader or by the academic lecturers responsible for facilitating the module. Module guides assist module leaders in planning and facilitating their modules in line with the curriculum recommendations. Students also benefit from accessing the module's overview of what will be expected from them to be successful in their learning.

However, if a module guide is unclear about what is expected of students, teaching and learning in the classroom are unlikely to be effective. A study examining the quality and misuse of worksheets used during work-integrated learning in urban South African primary schools found that worksheets were culturally insensitive, contained grammatical inaccuracies, were used as inappropriate learning support material, and presented poorly formulated tasks (Evans & Cleghorn, 2022). On the other hand, it is important to incorporate technology into classroom teaching. Walker (2009) emphasizes that technology has the advantage of widening access and creating new approaches to learning. This is supported by Raja and Nagasubramani (2018), who argue that technology makes the teaching and learning process more stimulating and enjoyable for both students and teachers. A study examining the role of digital technology in

education found that technology has shifted the education system's paradigm, enabling curriculum implementers and recipients to access information more easily than before (Haleem et al., 2022).

The studies discussed above highlight the challenges of limited language proficiency, curriculum mismatch, the accessibility of learning materials, and a lack of clarity in module guides, and some of these works are structural and policy oriented. Thus, there is still limited empirical support for pre-service teachers' experiences of learning Sesotho home language modules at the content and pedagogical levels in Higher Education Institutions. Hence, the current study is vital in filling this gap. This study is anchored in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that language is learned through interaction among people. Eun and Lim (2009) also concur that the sociocultural theory is a motivating force behind human development and learning. Sultan (2017), in examining the role of social context in language learning, found that socially inclined environments facilitate language learning and shape the sociocultural aspects of linguistic competence.

Language learning programmes in the context of teaching pre-service teachers in higher education are enhanced by the Interactive Hypothesis, which posits that conversational interaction "facilitates language acquisition because it connects input (what learners hear and read); internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output (what learners produce) in productive ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452). This further emphasizes the critical role that environmental factors (e.g., access to books and educational materials) play in language learning. Hence, Vygotsky believes that mediation is a central concept to language learning. This is supported by Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2011), who argued that language is mediated by material and social artefacts, which are essential for determining how humans think.

Thus, mediation in language learning can be facilitated through scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development, which involves engaging more knowledgeable others. Chea and Kuon (2024, p. 93) define scaffolding as "a temporary framework that supports a building during construction." This, according to Vygotsky, implies that challenging tasks or those that lie outside the Zone of Proximal Development can be achieved through the guidance and support of a more knowledgeable other (i.e., a teacher or a more capable peer). However, once competence is achieved on the assigned task, support should be withdrawn so the learner can enact it independently.

Sociocultural theory is relevant to this study because it provides a lens for understanding how pre-service teachers learn Sesotho home language modules at the content and pedagogical levels in Higher Education Institutions. Moreover, this theory is useful for guiding the interpretation of data collected in this study through focus group interviews with pre-service teachers, particularly by highlighting the significance of learning language through interaction with others.

3. Methodology

To address the study's research question, a qualitative case study research design was used for a sample of student teachers enrolled in Sesotho modules in the Faculties of Humanities and Education at the University of Free State. Qualitative researchers observe people in their natural setting to learn what and why they think and act the way they do (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010). Thus, the focus group interviews were conducted to understand student teachers' experiences with learning Sesotho modules at the content and pedagogical levels. The focus group interviews were conducted with two cohorts of 12 student teachers, divided into two groups: six 1st- and 2nd-year students and six 3rd- and 4th-year students, in the Faculties of Education and Humanities. The semi-structured interview tool, which included unstructured questions, was used in the focus groups to help the researcher probe further into students' responses. Focus group interviews with student teachers last approximately 35 minutes per group.

These students were sampled purposefully based on their enrolment in the undergraduate module of the Sesotho home language. Moreover, these students were sampled based on their experiences of learning Sesotho across diverse contexts characterized by two different faculties (e.g., Humanities and Education). Additionally, it was easier for a single researcher to manage 12-student focus groups (six per Sesotho module) with the knowledge and experience to provide responses related to the focus area of the present study. The targeted university was sampled conveniently based on accessibility, as it is in the researchers' home province.

The six stages of thematic data analysis proposed by Braun et al. (2023) were used to analyze the data collected through focus groups with student teachers. The entire analysis was conducted according to the following six steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and, lastly, reporting the findings. However, data saturation was not achieved due to the limited time available to conclude the study, suggesting that further themes may still emerge from the raw data. Trustworthiness was established in this study through transferability, which involved clearly describing the sampling methods used to select participants and the research field. At the same time, dependability was confirmed by documenting all aspects of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.1 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were adhered to by requesting ethical approval from the UFS General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC), which was approved under the ethical clearance number UFS-HSD202/2600. Permission was also sought and granted by the UFS to collect data from the student teachers. Thereafter, the student teachers from each faculty were contacted to be briefed about the purpose of the study. All the sampled student teachers signed written consent forms before they participated in the study. Pseudonyms were used throughout the analysis (e.g., for the 1st cohort of student teachers who enrolled for Sesotho HL content, codes *A, B, C, D, E*, and *F* are used, and the 2nd cohort uses *G, H, I, J, K*, and *L*) to protect their identity.

4. Results

In this section, data collected through focus groups are presented under the following themes: limited proficiency in the Sesotho home language, curriculum mismatch, accessibility of Sesotho learning materials, and lack of clarity in module guides. Presentation of these themes cuts across content and pedagogical modules.

4.1 Theme 1: Limited proficiency in Sesotho home language

This theme highlights student teachers' reflections on their proficiency in Sesotho. For example, they highlighted that

"Before starting Sesotho home language content modules, my proficiency in Sesotho was limited." (Student Teacher B).

"The way I speak Sesotho is not proficient in Sesotho, and I did not like the language at school. I was just attending classes for the sake of attending; I was also underperforming at school." (Student Teacher C).

"Yes, the concepts were easy, but we know that for some of us, when we are alone, it becomes difficult, especially when we have nowhere to refer to or catch up on what we have learnt in the classroom - I am referring to students who did not study Sesotho home language in high school at all."(Student Teacher G).

...when we analyzed poems, we followed the experiences and skills of our previous teachers at high schools, let alone our colleagues who did not do Sesotho home language at the high school level; they struggled more." (Student Teacher H).

According to the responses above, the teachers explained that they are incompetent in Sesotho. However, their competence varied: some, like Student Teacher B, had only challenges with using Sesotho before registering it as a module, suggesting that they gradually acquired fluency through classroom learning. However, others, despite having learned Sesotho at school level, seem less interested in it. In contrast, others are interested in learning the language but struggle to find people who can support them. It was also interesting to note that Student Teacher H, who seemed to have learned Sesotho as a home language throughout schooling, also struggled to cope with learning it at a higher education level.

4.2 Theme 2: Curriculum mismatch

In terms of establishing student teachers' experiences of learning Sesotho home language modules at the content and pedagogical levels, they noted that

"Content modules focus on background and historical knowledge of Sesotho culture and language."(Student Teacher A).

"The people who set the higher education curriculum could remove the topic that involves (Dihlopha theysa mabitso/Classification of Sesotho

nouns) as they are redundant in learning the Sesotho language. They could replace the topic by allocating more time to literature and encouraging people to read more books to improve their reading skills in Sesotho." (Student Teacher B).

"No, because education focuses more on teaching practice, assuming that students gain adequate theory knowledge of the Humanities during their first and second years of studies." (Student Teacher G).

"The theory we acquired in the Humanities is not good enough. The focus was primarily on the history and culture of the Basotho nation; furthermore, in these modules, we are a mix of students pursuing different courses and careers, and the content generally tries to accommodate diverse courses." (Student Teacher H).

"No, because what we are taught in education is nothing new but the repetition of what was taught in high school." (Student Teacher J).

"The module is aligned with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) without promoting a genuine understanding of Sesotho HL language and culture. The module does not enhance my understanding of Sesotho culture and language, as it primarily focuses on skills and practice, rather than on the knowledge gained during the first and second years." (Student Teacher G).

"The literature part is difficult for many students, and our mentor teachers struggle to offer this subject during our teaching practice." (Student Teacher I).

The responses of most Student Teachers suggest that what is taught at the content level in the Sesotho module is outdated and does not adequately prepare them to learn to teach Sesotho at the pedagogical level. Student Teacher G's response reflects the time they spent on teaching practice rather than learning in the classroom.

4.3 Theme 3: Accessibility of learning materials

For accessing learning materials, the student teachers noted that

"As much as we felt it was easy to learn, some of our classmates did not understand, making it difficult for them because there are no specific Sesotho textbooks for teaching methods. We had to use English textbooks and translate." (Student Teacher M).

"We struggle to reflect on what was taught in class due to a lack of resources, particularly for those who did not take Sesotho HL in high school." (Student Teacher C).

"It is difficult to analyze the plot of a short story, drama, or novel. This challenge was caused by the COVID-19 situation, which compelled us to

study and analyze only one book we had read in Grade 12.” (Student Teacher H).

“We struggle to reflect on what was taught in class because there are no resources, particularly for those who did not take Sesotho HL in high school. There are no specific Sesotho textbooks for teaching methods, and we have to use English textbooks and translate them.” (Student Teacher G).

The responses above highlight that, although Sesotho is taught as a module at the content and pedagogical levels, students still experience challenges accessing materials written in Sesotho. Student Teacher G also adds that limited access to these materials deprives learners of Sesotho at the second-language level.

4.4 Theme 4: Lack of clarity in module guides

The above-mentioned theme was identified from students' responses to the module guides developed to highlight their Sesotho module activities. For example, they noted that:

“I think the module guides could be made more to the point and include many examples to help students understand better.” (Student Teacher C).

“Using more advanced technology-based resources for the 4th Industrial Revolution and updating information in the learning resources to address current affairs.” (Student Teacher D).

These responses suggest that student teachers are dissatisfied with the material used to teach Sesotho at the content level. Hence, they deem it necessary to digitize these materials.

5. Discussion

The present study sought to explore pre-service teachers' experiences of learning Sesotho home language content and pedagogical modules in the Higher Education Institution. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory was used to support this study in interpreting the findings. Hence, this section draws from the following four themes: limited proficiency in the Sesotho home language, curriculum mismatch, accessibility of Sesotho learning materials, and unclear module guides.

5.1 Limited Proficiency in Sesotho Home Language

Findings revealed that pre-service teachers enrolled in Sesotho home language modules at the content and pedagogical levels lack proficiency in Sesotho. This suggests that teachers produced are sent to schools with limited content and pedagogical knowledge required for teaching language. These findings corroborated those of Phillips and Condy (2023), who found a misalignment between how training occurs on campuses and what students face in the classroom after completing their four-year Bachelor of Education programme.

From Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, a lack of exposure to social interaction in language learning and ineffective scaffolding deprives students of the opportunity to move beyond their Zone of Proximal Development. Hence, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that mediation through scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development, which involves the engagement of more knowledgeable others, is required in language teaching and learning. In practice, the findings of this study highlight the need for teacher training programmes to provide the necessary interventions that adequately prepare all student teachers, including those with limited proficiency in the target language, for teaching African languages in schools.

5.2 Curriculum Mismatch

The study's findings further showed a misalignment between Sesotho home-language content modules in the Faculty of Humanities and pedagogical modules in the Faculty of Education. For example, student teachers in the 1st- and 2nd-year cohort highlighted that their content modules focus only on historical knowledge of Sesotho culture and language structures and conventions. This suggests that 2nd-year BEd students might be transitioning from the Faculty of Humanities to Education without being adequately prepared to meet the demands of acquiring the pedagogical skills required to teach language in schools. These findings support those of Balada and Lo (2024), who revealed a significant difference between the skills taught and the skills sought in the food industry. Curriculum misalignment, according to Bull (2025), hinders students' ability to engage meaningfully in learning and to acquire knowledge for academic success.

On the other hand, the 3rd and 4th-year student teachers who enrolled for Sesotho pedagogical modules noted that the challenge of being unable to catch up with other learning units, given the time spent on Teaching Practice evaluations in schools, suggested that they might not be afforded adequate time for classroom interaction during the year, which may likely deprive them with effective time to acquire knowledge required for their professional career. A study by Zondo and Adu (2024) identified a gap between theory and practice due to students' inability to integrate theoretical knowledge with practice.

The findings from both cohorts of student teachers contradict Shulman's notion that acquiring content and pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1987) is required for effective teaching and learning of language in the classroom context. The findings highlighted above were supported by Moletsane (2020), who argued that students graduate with insufficient skills to become employable in the industry. On the other hand, Sibuyi (2012) argued that the content and pedagogical knowledge that teachers bring to the classroom affect whether learning will be successful.

5.3 Accessibility of Sesotho Learning Materials

A lack of access to Sesotho home-language teaching and learning materials was identified as another significant shortcoming, which seemed to have deprived students of learning opportunities. The finding validates Omarsaib's (2025), who showed that the lack of instructional materials in the classroom hinders effective learning. This challenged Vygotsky's concept of mediation, which advocates for

the engagement of material and artefacts to facilitate successful learning. The student teachers also reflected on the shortage of Sesotho reading texts, which often leads to relying on translated versions of English texts. However, translation is unlikely to be reliable, as Matricciani (2025, p. 1) notes, “it can distort the linguistic parameters of source texts written in inflected language.”

5.4 Lack of Clarity in Module Guides

When teaching and learning materials were available, student teachers indicated that their module guides did not clearly outline the module activities. This suggests that the implementers of the curriculum may have developed their module guides solely to meet policy obligations. These findings support Evans and Cleghorn’s (2022) findings by demonstrating a lack of diligence and commitment in planning and designing tools to support teaching and learning. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, many students at higher education institutions have preferred shorter lectures to longer ones (Fullard, 2024). Therefore, it is of utmost importance for module designers to develop module guides that offer students clear, practical activities that help them understand what is expected of them in the modules they have registered for.

Given the significance of mediation tools emphasized by Vygotsky, other student teachers highlighted a need to tap into advanced technology, which may likely improve the accessibility of resources for learning Sesotho content and pedagogical modules. Walker (2009) also concurs that technology is useful in promoting inclusive practices in education. This study’s findings corroborate those of Haleem et al. (2022), which showed the positive impact of introducing technology in education. The implementation of technology in the classroom, as highlighted by student teachers, could also cater to the learning needs of all students, including those with limited language proficiency.

6. Conclusion

The current study sought to explore the pre-service teachers’ experiences of learning Sesotho home language modules at the content and pedagogical levels at the University of Free State. A qualitative research design was used to conduct focus group interviews with student teachers in the Faculties of Humanities and Education. The Findings revealed closely interlinked challenges of limited language proficiency, curriculum mismatch, lack of teaching and learning resources, and unclear module guides, which seemed to be contributory factors to curriculum misalignment between Sesotho home language content and pedagogical modules.

The findings also showed that the content and pedagogical modules offered to pre-service teachers might be inadequate to equip them with the skills required to teach Sesotho as a home language at the school level. Thus, what student teachers were taught at the content level might not be aligned with what was offered at the pedagogical level. Consequently, the level of coping with the demands of the curriculum at the pedagogical level became unbearable for the 3rd- and 4th-year students, given the challenges of inadequate preparedness to acquire content knowledge. Therefore, it is recommended that BEd students be effectively

supported in the classroom to overcome the challenges mentioned above. Additionally, the curriculum of both content and pedagogy in Sesotho home language modules might need to be revisited in consultation with relevant stakeholders to address the existing misalignment between theory and practice, as this has implications in determining the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of teaching and learning at the school level.

7. Conflict of Interest

We don't have conflicts of interest to declare. We would like to acknowledge the pre-service teachers who participated in this study and thank our supervisor for guidance and support throughout our doctoral journey.

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The authors wish to declare the use of AI in the alphabetical arrangement of the reference list of this paper.

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