Shortcomings of the written survey questionnaire for discovering language learner perceptions: reflections of a researcher

ABSTRACT

In this article I describe my reflections on using a written survey questionnaire to investigate, on a large-scale, students' perceptions of studying Xhosa as a first language in high schools. I describe the aims of the project, how the questionnaire was designed, and the problems I encountered with the analysis of the data. The problems can be categorised as follows: poor survey design; not doing enough with the responses; questions which only scratch the surface; and, respondents not knowing how to answer questions appropriately. Example questions from the questionnaire are given to illustrate these shortcomings. Recommendations for avoiding similar problems are given. The focus in this article is on the problem questions only; most of the questions on the 80-item questionnaire were successful in capturing the desired responses. The study as a whole, therefore, was a success.

Keywords:
Learner perceptions; Xhosa learning; survey design

1. Introduction

This article reports on my experiences of using a survey questionnaire to investigate students' perceptions of studying language. More specifically, the research project aimed to discover high school students' perceptions of studying Xhosa as a first language. 2825 respondents in 26 schools in the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces successfully completed the 80-item questionnaire. All the questions were responded to in writing and were fixed-alternative in format (Kidder, 1981; Low, 1996); there were no open-ended questions. A sample of question types, with the original numbering, is provided in the Appendix (further questions are included as examples in the article itself).

For me, survey research on such a large scale was a new experience. My previous investigations of language learner perceptions had been typically ethnographic, with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, a so-called multi-method approach (Agar, 1985; Smith, 1992). Surveys were a part of these investigations, but they were designed for use within only one school and with a limited number of classes; in other words, the samples were very small, quite different from that in the study which is the focus of this article.

In this article, I describe the aims of the project, the procedures I followed to design the questionnaire, and the problems I encountered when analysing the data. Unfortunately, some of the problems only revealed themselves once the data had already been collected, a phenomenon not atypical of survey research (Marsh, 1982). One such problem was the format of some of the questions. It seems as though no matter how meticulous one is in designing the data-collection instrument, it is always possible to find weaknesses in its construction. One should aim, of course, to prevent this happening as far as possible, and not doing so has often been one of the major

criticisms of survey research methods (see Alderson, 1992; de Vaus, 1986).

It is not only the format of the questions which can lead to unreliability. Even a questionnaire which has carefully constructed questions needs to be compatible with the respondents for whom it is intended; by taking into account, for example, their ability to understand the language used in the questions and instructions (Babbie, 1990), and their ability to make sense of other visual stimuli such as numbered rating scales and boxes for ticking. When the questionnaire is administered to young, non-English-speaking background school students, such as in my study, design constraints are particularly significant.

Furthermore, for survey questionnaire research to be successful, it obviously has to provide data which answer the stated research questions. In other words, the instrument has to have validity. One of the problems I encountered with my study was that although the questionnaire did, in most cases, generate the data I was looking for, it was not enough; i.e. I got what I asked the questionnaire to get for me, but I wanted to know more. I was provided with only a "quick snapshot but no film of interaction and language life" (Baker, 1997: 43). In some cases, fixed-alternative questions asked respondents to select an answer from a given range, but there was no way I could find out the reason for their choice. Or, respondents indicated that they did participate in a particular activity in the classroom, but it was impossible for me to tell exactly how much time they spent on it (in terms of total class time or in comparison with other activities). I was aware, of course, from the outset that these qualitative descriptions would be missing, but I was nevertheless disappointed by the conspicuousness of their absence.

The shortcomings I experienced in this research approach stemmed from four sources: poor survey design; not doing enough with the responses; questions which only scratch the surface; and, respondents not knowing how to answer questions appropriately. What follows are my personal reflections on the successes and failures of the survey instrument I used. Examples illustrating the shortcomings of specific questions will be presented and discussed. More systematic and technical deconstructions of the questionnaire can be found in Block (1998) and Low (1996, 1999). These texts, and many others on survey research methodology, give excellent guidance for constructing questionnaires, but they do so in typical textbook fashion. This article, on the other hand, contextualises the discussion of the problem-questions within one research project and it presents the researcher's assessment of the questions based on difficulties experienced with their analysis and interpretation.

It should be pointed out that the focus in this article is on the small number of problem questions only; most of the questions on the 80-item questionnaire were successful in capturing the desired responses. As a whole, the study produced findings which have generated important topics for further discussion and research (its main aim – see below). Recommendations for avoiding problems similar to those I encountered in this project are given at the end of the article. Next, a brief description of the study is provided.

2. The study

2.1 Aims of the study

The research question asked in the study can broadly be stated as follows: What are the perceptions of high school Xhosa First Language (XL1) students of the teaching/learning they experience in their Xhosa language classes at school? More specifically, by means of a survey questionnaire, the research investigated the perceptions of Grade 11 learners in selected schools in the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. The reasons for choosing Grade 11 learners were: (a) they had sufficient experience of high school XL1 in order to respond knowledgeably to the

questions, (b) their language and visual literacy skills would have been developed to the level where they would be able to interpret what was being asked in each question, and (c) they were probably representative of a typical high school learner at their school (a few teachers, for example, indicated that their Grade 12 learners, those in their final year of high school, get special attention; the "better" teachers, more supervision and a larger share of resources, for instance).

The research had three broad inter-related aims: (a) The research was to be exploratory. By this I mean that my aim was to gain insight into an area which had not been widely researched; in other words, to test the waters, to get a superficial but wide view of the situation, a research aim often associated with survey research methods (Bless and Higson-Smith, 1995). (b) The goal, therefore, was to determine general trends and patterns in perceptions of XL1 teaching/learning, rather than to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (like is possible in participant observation and lengthy interviews, for instance). The type of questions asked are more of the *what* and *how* kind than the *why* kind (although an attempt was made to ask the latter as well). (c) Perhaps one of the more important aims of the research project was to generate further research into the area of African language teaching in schools. Calls for research into African languages in South Africa have come from those involved in language planning (e.g. Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1999; LANGTAG, 1996; Msimang, 1993) and language-in-education planning and practice (e.g. Barkhuizen & Gough, 1996; de Klerk, 1995; Satyo, 1993). Wessels (1998: 121) states that "there is a need for research relating to the use of African languages for educational purposes. The need for curriculum development is of particular importance in the new educational system".

2.2 Designing the questionnaire

The first steps in designing the questionnaire involved wide consultation. I held discussions with experts in the fields of African languages and applied linguistics, especially on topics such as language policy, language variation and language learning. I also consulted teacher educators in order to help select and focus the areas to be covered in the questionnaire (that is, to decide on the topics which the questions would cover). Researchers, too, were helpful in this regard. In addition, they provided useful information concerning the design and format of the questionnaire (including the number and sequence of questions, types of questions, print size, page colour and layout). Consultants in this group came from universities, examination boards and non-governmental organizations involved in teacher education, school support and research.

I also interviewed teachers and examiners of African languages. The main purpose was to ask them to suggest possible questions which could be included in the questionnaire and to comment on those which I had already formulated; usually to confirm whether they were relevant, reflected what actually happens in African language classes at school and whether they could be easily understood and answered by school learners.

After I had written the first draft of the questionnaire I consulted a statistician to ensure that the design was appropriate for easy data-capturing and the statistical analysis which I had anticipated. Subsequent visits took place before the questionnaire design was finalised.

I held a workshop with five recent high school finishers who studied XL1 while at school. Together, we read through and answered each question on the questionnaire with the aim of confirming its relevance and comprehensibility. Further options were also generated and less likely responses deleted in questions where choices were given. I regarded this limited exercise as my pilot study, a decision which I retrospectively believe to be a weakness in the study.

During these consultations there was much discussion about the content of the questionnaire.

My focus (as stated in the research question) was to investigate the teaching and learning of XL1 from the learners' perspective. I wanted, therefore, to focus my attention on their perceptions of what actually happens in their Xhosa classes; the teaching processes, the activities which learners participate in, the materials and technology used and their work ethic. There was constant pressure, however, from consultants to include questions on language-in-education policy issues and on language attitudes (especially comparisons between Xhosa and English, and to a lesser extent, Afrikaans). Including so many topics would, firstly, have resulted in the survey asking questions which were not compatible with the research question, and secondly, have resulted in a very long questionnaire. Policy and English-related questions were, however, included where they related directly to the teaching and learning of XL1.

The following eight categories of questions were included in the 80-item questionnaire (some questions fall into more than one category): (1) demographic information, (2) work routines, (3) in-class processes: teaching, materials, activities, (4) Xhosa literacy, (5) Xhosa varieties, (6) contact with English, (7) status of Xhosa at school, and (8) status of Xhosa after school.

Three further aspects regarding the construction of the survey questionnaire need to be raised. I decided that all questions would be closed-ended, fixed-alternative questions; in other words, I did not want respondents to write anything in their own words on the questionnaire. This is mainly for ease of analysis, especially since the number of respondents was large, but also because of my experience of analysing questionnaires completed by school-age respondents. The tendency is for them to be more passive in their responses (ticking) rather than active (writing words and sentences) when both options are available.

The language used in the questions and the format of each question-type had to be such that school learners would easily be able to answer the questions. This required consultation with language teachers, researchers, appropriate published research literature and XL1 learners.

Finally, once the questionnaire had reached a near-final draft, it was completely translated into Xhosa. This process resulted in minor adjustments to the English version. Both versions of the questionnaire were then proofread to ensure accuracy of the language and of the translation. English and Xhosa questionnaires, on different coloured paper, were stapled together. Respondents therefore received both versions, and had the choice of answering in either English or Xhosa (issues of translation and questionnaire reliability are acknowledged, but outside the scope of this article).

After the questionnaires had been distributed, filled in and collected from the schools, the research team captured the data of all acceptable questionnaires (N=2825) onto a computer spreadsheet programme. The statistics involved calculating frequencies of responses to each question and converting these into percentages. These represent the quantitative findings of the study. Finally, I explored possible interpretations of the findings for each questions. In doing so, I consulted a number of colleagues through personal communication, at a university departmental research seminar and at a national conference. A report of the findings (Barkhuizen 2001) was presented to the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), the organisation which funded the project. Further reports have been prepared for publication in academic journals (Barkhuizen, in press, a; in press , b).

3. Shortcomings of the questionnaire

In this section, examples of questions which illustrate shortcomings in the following four areas will be presented: poor survey design; not doing enough with the responses; questions which only scratch the surface; and, respondents not knowing how to answer questions appropriately. I use the

word "shortcomings" to refer to both design weaknesses in the format and language of the questions, and the constraints of survey research which hinder the thorough analysis and interpretation of learners' perceptions.

3.1 Incompatible answers

The first two questions were the following:

1. How many **languages** do you study as subjects at school?
   One Two Three

2. Which languages do you study as subjects at school?
   Xhosa 1st Language
   English 2nd Language
   Afrikaans 2nd language
   English 1st Language
   Afrikaans 1st Language
   Any other language? _____

Question 1 required respondents to indicate the number of languages they studied as school subjects. Only in exceptional circumstances, such as with immigrant students, can one language be studied, since two is the minimum number of languages which have to be studied at high school in South Africa. It appeared as though this question was answered adequately since 100% of the respondents ticked either Two or Three. However, when some students answered Question 2, the number of languages they marked did not match the number they said they studied in Question 1. The questions raised in these cases are: Did they not understand how to answer this type of question properly, or did they not care enough to fill it in accurately? And some of the responses to *Any other language?* did not clarify the matter: some students wrote German or French when it was quite clear that those languages were not taught in the school, and others wrote mathematics or biology, not languages at all.

When students' responses to these two questions did not match it was often easy to tell what they should have answered by looking at the questionnaires which came immediately before and after them in the pile, since the questionnaires from the same class (and school) were packed together. Although "correcting" these inaccurate responses may have improved reliability, it certainly would have raised ethical issues.

3.2 An uninformative pair of questions

A pair of questions which proved to be rather uninformative was the following:

5. In Grade 11, how many Xhosa periods are **on your timetable** in a week?
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 More than 6

6. In Grade 11, about how many Xhosa periods **actually** take place each week?
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 More than 6

With these questions I was trying to discover whether the number of lessons which actually took place accurately reflected the number that were scheduled on the timetable. The results for these two questions can be seen in Figure 1.

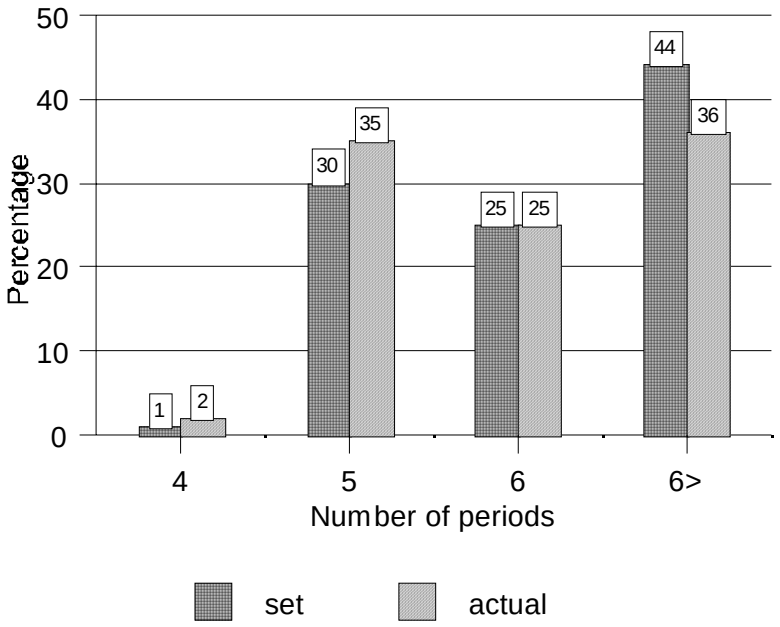

Figure 1: Percentage of set Xhosa periods on the timetable and the percentage of periods which actually take place (Questions 5 and 6).

What this graph shows is that 44% of all the students indicate that they have set on their timetables more than 6 Xhosa periods per week. But for only 36% of all students do more than 6 actually take place. What this finding does not tell us is why there is an 8% difference. Do the 6> students only have 6 periods, or 5? And for those students with 6 scheduled periods, do they continue to have 6 (the 25% appears to remain constant), or have some shifted down to 5 periods and the gap filled by those dropping from more than 6, or have some shifted up to 6>? This pair of questions is poorly designed and certainly not enough was done statistically to make this finding useful. Furthermore, a number of my consultants pointed out that school learners are often unaware of timetable schedules, and whether or not they are fully implemented (although I feel that most learners probably are), so perhaps the responses to these questions should be treated tentatively.

3.3 Different interpretations of quantity

There were a number of questions which required individuals to specify if they personally (as opposed to their class, for example) do a particular type of activity, and if so, how much of it they do. Here are two such questions:

10. If you get homework, how often do you do your Xhosa homework?
    A lot Only sometimes Never

29. Do you **write** Xhosa outside of school?
    A lot Sometimes Almost never Never

With this type of question, A lot or Never probably mean different things to different people. Writing three e-mail messages and a grocery list in Xhosa may be a lot of Xhosa writing for one student, but very little for someone who writes everything in Xhosa. Further probing for answers to these questions would take place more successfully in interviews than on the questionnaire,

which would, firstly, add to the length of the already-long questionnaire, and secondly, would probably result in a clumsy, hard-to-interpret series of related questions. Confronted with situations like these during the analysis I found it very frustrating not being able to simply ask the students about their Xhosa writing activities.

A similar problem emerged with the following type of question:

14. When you have finished school, **Xhosa** will be useful for: (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

    your job
    studying at college or university
    talking with your friends
    reading newspapers and magazines
    writing letters
    writing notes and messages
    meeting new people

Respondents find themselves in a dilemma here. They will probably ask themselves: "How useful?" Xhosa may be useful for all of the listed activities, but to very different degrees. At what point is Xhosa's usefulness considered to be enough to warrant a tick. Decisions would no doubt differ from one respondent to the next. In defence of the question, however, it does reveal a general, predictable trend in thinking about the role of Xhosa in life after school. 54% of respondents indicated that Xhosa would be useful for the informal talking with your friends; by far the highest rated option. Once again, though, as a researcher I would like to know a little more about why the respondents answered as they did.

A similar problem exists with Questions 39 and 43 with regard to the quantity (the "how much?") of the activity. In one school, a library visit may take place once a semester and in another once or twice a week; but students in both schools will tick the visit the school library block indicating, accurately, that they do so, albeit to very different extents.

39. During my Xhosa lessons, we: (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

    read Xhosa magazines
    read Xhosa newspapers
    visit the school library

43. In my Xhosa lessons, our teacher asks us to: (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

    make speeches in front of the class
    talk in groups
    have debates

3.4 Inappropriate follow-on

A number of responses to Questions 17 below showed quite clearly that some of the students lacked the reading skills or were unfamiliar with the questionnaire genre to follow instructions satisfactorily.

16. Does your Xhosa teacher use English in your Xhosa classes?

    A lot Only sometimes Never

17. If you answered **Never** to Question 16, go to Question 18. If you answered **A lot** or **Only sometimes** to Question 16, answer this question: When does your Xhosa teacher use English in Xhosa classes? (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

    to make jokes
    when explaining Xhosa work to you
    when telling you what to do
    when he or she is angry

The language of the instruction here is quite complex, but typical of questionnaires. Unfortunately, some of the respondents ignored the instruction not to answer this question if they had answered Never to Question 16; they went ahead and made known their observations of something which they apparently never witnessed! Although there were not too many who made this mistake, how do we analyse the responses? One could assume that, since the deviant respondents had an answer to Question 17, they got Question 16 wrong, and so we ignore their answer to number 16. Or, since they said Never to 16, we ignore the response to 17. Or, we could tally the responses as given, notwithstanding the inconsistency. Any of these options leads to a degree of unreliability.

To avoid the lengthy instruction in the questions above, I tried a different approach in Questions 19 and 20.

19. Do you think it is **important** to study Xhosa as a subject at school?

    Yes No

20. Studying Xhosa as a subject at school **is important** because: (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

    Xhosa is an official language of SA
    Xhosa will help me get a job one day
    I love the language
    Xhosa is the language of my people
    Xhosa will help me if I study further

This is perhaps a design fault because respondents would feel compelled to answer both questions, even if they had said No to number 19 (i.e. they were not given an out in the instructions). Consequently, almost everyone answered 20 regardless of their response to 19. As with Question 14 above, I think the reason has to do with the degree of personal interpretation of an answer. Yes and No are too definite; there is no range of importance. Consequently, someone who is not a definite No, may answer Yes even though they lean towards the No end of the Yes - No continuum, and so feel obliged to give a response to Question 20, where the problem of "How important?" once again emerges.

The same situation occurred with the following two related questions. Many respondents who answered Never for Question 27 went on to answer Question 28, when logically they shouldn't have.

27. Do you **read** Xhosa outside of school?
    A lot Sometimes Almost never Never

28. If you do **read** Xhosa outside of school, what do you read?

    newspapers

magazines
the Bible
novels and stories (**not** school books)
letters
notes and messages
don't read Xhosa outside of school

3.5 An ambiguous question

38. In my Xhosa lessons, my teacher asks us to: (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

listen to the radio
watch TV or videos
use computers
listen to music

All four activities could, given the facilities, be done in the classroom, but the teacher could also (in class) have asked the students to do them at home!

3.6 The least successful question

Perhaps the least successful question on the questionnaire was the following:

37. I like my Xhosa **teacher**.
A lot Only sometimes Not at all

My aim here was to determine the atmosphere of Xhosa classrooms and the nature of the relationships students had with their teachers. A number of my consultant predicted that the respondents would all answer in the affirmative, fearing reprisals if their teachers discovered what they had answered. They were right, although I'm not absolutely sure if their reason is accurate: 93% answered A lot (69%) and Only sometimes (24%), a response which, I would say, based on my intuitions and experience, is highly inflated. Only a few answered Not at all (7%).

3.7 Unfamiliar visual arrangements

Towards the end of the questionnaire the questions took the form of a set of four, four-point rating scales which measured respondents' perceptions of a selection of seven language learning activities in terms of (a) their difficulty (see Questions 50–56 below), (b) their predicted usefulness for life after school, (c) whether or not the students enjoyed doing them, and (d) their effectiveness in improving the students' Xhosa language skills.

50–56: How **difficult** do you find the following activities in your Xhosa lessons? 4 is **Very difficult** and 1 is **Very easy**.

	Very difficult	Difficult	Easy	Very easy
50. Writing compositions	4	3	2	1
51. Doing oral presentations, like speeches	4	3	2	1
52. Learning about Xhosa grammar	4	3	2	1
53. Learning about Xhosa phonetics	4	3	2	1

54.	Reading the literature books	4	3	2	1
55.	Learning correct Xhosa spelling	4	3	2	1
56.	Doing comprehensions	4	3	2	1

These rating scales proved to be very successful. They provided useful information concerning the nature of Xhosa lessons; particularly in terms of the predictable negative perceptions associated with the mechanical (as opposed to more communicative) phonetics and grammar activities, both rated most negative on all four sets of rating scales (see a-d above). So, a general trend was determined. However, misgivings about total reliability exist because of the following two observations: firstly, some students ticked the example blocks above the line, a hint perhaps that they did not know exactly what to do; secondly, in quite a few cases, and possibly for the same reason, respondents ticked only one option (say, 3) for all seven activities, an unlikely response perhaps.

4. Concluding remarks

This survey research project, on the whole, achieved its aims: It aimed to be exploratory, and it certainly was. For the first time, students' perceptions of studying Xhosa in South Africa were investigated on a large scale, and the focus was on what happens inside schools and classrooms, as opposed to the more common research into African-language education, which typically concentrates on broader, socio-political language planning matters. General trends and patterns in student perceptions of XL1 teaching/learning were determined notwithstanding the shortcomings disclosed in this article.

Many of the findings in this study raised very interesting questions which invite further investigation. For example, one finding indicated that learners would prefer to use Xhosa rather than English as the language of learning and teaching in their Biblical Studies classes. However, for other subjects their choice is English. This is interesting and deserves further attention, but because of the design of my study it was impossible to discover why they felt this way. Follow-up ethnographic, more qualitative research (Cumming, 1994) may be able to find the answers to this question and a host of others on the questionnaire. Researchers, using the findings generated in this research project, now need to go into schools and into XL1 classrooms to observe what is actually happening there. They need to talk to the learners: individually and in groups. Talking to learners and their teachers will enable researchers to delve much deeper into their thoughts about language teaching and their proposals for any changes they may recommend.

The survey questionnaire in this study has, nevertheless, produced findings which are meaningful and useful (see similar language education survey research in Barkhuizen, 1998; Dyers, 1999; Giles, Hewstone and Ball, 1983; Martin-Jones 1991). What produced these findings were the good questions: questions which were designed is such a way as to generate valid, reliable answers. For survey questionnaires to achieve this aim with all of its questions, I'd suggest the following:

- Thoroughly review the literature on questionnaire design, such as Block (1998), Low (1996, 1999) and Marsh (1982).
- Pay careful attention to all aspects of the design of each question: the vocabulary used, the sentence structure, and the visual impact.
- Share the draft(s) of the questionnaire with a researcher who has experience in survey research design and implementation.
- Pilot the questionnaire with a groups of respondents who resemble as closely as possible the target sample.

Finally, on a personal level, I found the research approach somewhat unsatisfying. I firmly believe that researchers need to match carefully their chosen research approach (including all its methods for collecting and analysing data) with themselves; not only their skills, but also their interests and their personality. For example, I like talking to people and watching them work, and I like interpreting and writing about my observations. I like less reducing people's perceptions to percentages and displaying them on spreadsheets. This is not to say that there is no place for survey research in the study of learner perceptions; this is what polls of all types do all the time. I believe, however, that this approach falls short of capturing rich descriptions of their perceptions.

5. Acknowledgement

This project was funded by a grant from the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) for which I express my thanks.

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Appendix

Sample question types from the survey questionnaire.

3. How old are you?
   15 or younger 16–18 19 or older

4. What is your gender?
   Male Female

11. Which subject do you find **easier** at school, Xhosa or English?
    Xhosa English

12. Which subject do you **enjoy** more at school, Xhosa or English?
    Xhosa English

23. The Xhosa I study at school is old and traditional ("deep" language).

□	□	□	□	□
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

24. The Xhosa I study at school is old and traditional ("deep" language).

□	□	□	□	□
Strongly	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly

agree	agree nor disagree	disagree

31. In my Xhosa lessons, our teacher gets us to **play games**.
A lot Only sometimes Never

32. In Xhosa lessons, we work in **groups**.
A lot Only sometimes Never

48. **Xhosa** should be used for teaching and learning which subjects? (You can tick more than one if you want to.)

Business economics
Biblical Studies
Geography
Maths
History
Biology

57–63: How much do you **enjoy** the following activities in your Xhosa lessons?
4 is **Enjoy a lot** and 1 is **Enjoy not at all**.

		Enjoy a lot	Enjoy quite a bit	Enjoy a little	Enjoy not at all
57.	Writing compositions	4	3	2	1
58.	Doing oral presentations, like speeches	4	3	2	1
59.	Learning about Xhosa grammar	4	3	2	1
60.	Learning about Xhosa phonetics	4	3	2	1
61.	Reading the literature books	4	3	2	1
62.	Learning correct Xhosa spelling	4	3	2	1
63.	Doing comprehensions	4	3	2	1

78. My Xhosa lessons help me to be a more **confident** person.
Yes No

79. My Xhosa lessons teach me to **work together better** with other people.
Yes No

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