The standards of the National Senior Certificate Home Language Examinations:

A comparison of South African official languages

UMALUSI

Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training

SETTING STANDARDS IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

10 YEARS

The standards of the National Senior Certificate Home Language Examinations: A comparison of South African official languages

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List of acronyms

ASC	Assessment Standards Committee
CASS	Continuous Assessment
DBE	Department of Basic Education
FAL	First Additional Language
FET	Further Education and Training
GFETQF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Framework
HL	Home Language
LoLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy
RNCS	Revised National Curriculum Statement
SA	South Africa
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality
SAGs	Subject Assessment Guidelines
SBA	School Based Assessment
SC	Senior Certificate

Executive summary

The purpose of the study
This study is part of a *Maintaining Standards* research project. The purpose of the study is to determine whether the 11 Home Language (HL) National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations are set at the same degree of difficulty and cognitive demand. Concern has been expressed that some of these examinations have very high pass rates.

Background to the study
It is only since 2008, with the introduction of the NSC, that there has been a common examination for all 11 official languages. A common curriculum was introduced for the first time in 1997 and a common set of assessment standards in 2001. In the past, there were separate syllabuses and examinations for English, Afrikaans and African languages. The languages also occupied different positions in colonial and apartheid society, the effects of which continue to this day.

African languages were only accorded official status in 1996, whereas English and Afrikaans have had this status for over a hundred years. To this day, English and Afrikaans continue to be used as languages of learning and teaching throughout schooling and at tertiary level, whereas African languages are only used for this purpose in the Foundation Phase. English and Afrikaans speakers therefore use their HLs for a wider range of literacy purposes than African language speakers and are exposed to a wider range of written texts.

Consequently, different communities of practice have evolved with regard to the teaching and examining of English, Afrikaans and African languages. For example, in the past, Afrikaans and African languages have had a greater focus on grammar and phonology than English. In the examinations prior to 1994, African languages allocated more marks to the assessment of grammar and fewer to the assessment of reading comprehension than either Afrikaans or English. English, in contrast, was strongly influenced by the British curriculum, with grammar being taught and examined in the context of a close reading of texts.

In South Africa, we currently have a common curriculum for HLs referenced to international standards, particularly to those of Anglophone countries. The transition to the new curriculum has been challenging for African languages and, to a lesser extent, for Afrikaans, since it requires new elements of practice, for example, a different approach to grammar, and the introduction of visual and media literacy, which have been part of the English curriculum for many years.

Trends in the examination results across the languages (2008 – 2011)
An important backdrop to the research reported in this study is examination performance over the four years in question. Averages of learner performance have been calculated for each language over this period. There is a substantial gap of over 10% between the lowest and highest averages. English, Afrikaans and the Sotho languages (Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi) have four-year averages between 52.9% and 55.6%, with Sesotho having the lowest average and Sepedi the highest. However, there are differences in the distribution of marks. The results for English are consistent from 2008 – 2010, showing a fairly normal distribution curve. Afrikaans has a similar distribution to that of English in 2008, but thereafter the results have become skewed slightly to the right suggesting that the examination might be getting easier. The Sotho languages have a fairly similar curve of distribution to one another, but again skewed somewhat to the right of English.

The Nguni languages (Siswati, isiXhosa and isiZulu) all have four-year performance averages of approximately 60% (isiNdebele is also an Nguni language but has a higher average). These languages have a similar distribution of marks skewed to the right of English. Xitsonga, Tshivenda and isiNdebele, all languages with a relatively small number of speakers, have the highest four-year performance averages of between 62.7% and 64.4%. They have a fairly similar distribution of marks skewed to the right of English.

Method and focus of the study

In this study, teams of four evaluators were appointed for each HL NSC examination. Using an adapted version of Barrett's taxonomy as an instrument, they evaluated the degree of difficulty and cognitive challenge of the examination papers that have been set and written since the NSC was introduced in 2008 (i.e. 2008 – 2011). The instrument categorizes examination questions in the following order from low to high level of cognitive challenge: literal comprehension, reorganization, inferential comprehension, evaluation, appreciation.

Results of the study

The examination papers (2008 – 2011) were evaluated according to their degree of difficulty. English was perceived to be difficult whereas Afrikaans was evaluated as too easy. With regard to the examinations in African languages, some languages were judged to be more difficult than others. For some languages, the examinations appeared to vary in terms of their degree of difficulty from year to year. This may be because examiners are still coming to terms with the format and standards of the new NSC examination. It may also reflect the different histories of the HL curricula and examinations.

One of the challenges of comparing the degree of difficulty of the eleven language examinations is the subjective nature of the evaluation. Whilst the results of the evaluation may be internally consistent for each language, the consistency with which the instrument has been applied throughout the languages is not guaranteed. A way forward would be to select key questions that have been identified as easy, moderate or difficult and submit them to statistical item analysis, which would reveal the actual degree of difficulty experienced by candidates in answering the questions.

The examination papers were also evaluated in terms of their cognitive demand. In the case of English, Paper 1 (Reading and Language study) was perceived to have too few low level questions. Nevertheless, the evaluators judged the papers to have an appropriate degree of challenge and questioned the standards set in the Subject Assessment Guidelines (SAGs). In the case of the other languages, there were perceived to be too many low level questions (except for Setswana) and too few inferential questions. For example in 2011, 66% of the isiNdebele questions, 83% of the Afrikaans questions and 91% of the isiXhosa questions were seen to be set at a low level. There was generally a lack of consistency in the setting of high level evaluation and appreciation questions, suggesting that examiners may be unfamiliar with setting them and/or that evaluators may be inexperienced in recognizing them. It may also be easier to set appreciation questions on the literature paper (Paper 2). Similarly, evaluators varied in the way in which they interpreted reorganization questions.

It was difficult to make comparisons with regard to Papers 2 and 3, because candidates could choose different questions, which were often set at different levels of cognitive challenge. It was also difficult to apply the instrument to Paper 3 (Writing), owing to the fact that Barrett's taxonomy, on which the instrument was based, was originally intended to assess comprehension. In addition, the evaluators found that factors other than cognitive challenge influence the degree of difficulty of an examination paper, for example, the nature and length of texts selected.

Despite the difficulties experienced in evaluating the papers, there was perceived to be some improvement in terms of the degree of challenge in the Sepedi, Setswana, isiZulu and Tshivenda papers over the period 2008 to 2011.

With regard to the content of the examinations, the evaluators raised three concerns. First, with the exception of English, all the teams felt that the grammar questions were limited in number, extremely easy and did not prepare students for studying Afrikaans or African languages at university level. The grammar questions in the 2011 examination were unrecognizable to some of the African language teams, appearing to them more like comprehension questions. These concerns reflect the different traditions of teaching grammar discussed above. Secondly, mention was made of biased and inappropriate texts, and thirdly, there was concern about badly translated texts. Translation is a particular concern for minority languages, such as isiNdebele and Tshivenda, which are regional and do not have access to a wide range of texts, especially media texts.

The evaluators also compared the 2011 examinations with those of the preceding three years. They felt the papers had become more balanced in 2011. They had also improved technically, in terms of such aspects as layout and proof-reading. Some of the examinations, such as English, Sepedi and Sesotho, appear to have become more challenging in 2011. For others it is difficult to generalize, since one of the three papers may have become more difficult and another easier.

With regard to the format of examination papers, there has been technical improvement, and the number of visual texts in African language papers seems to have increased since 2008. As has already been mentioned, in the African language papers the format of Section C of Paper 1 changed somewhat in 2011.

With regard to the overall standard and quality of the examinations, it was felt that there had been technical improvement since 2008. However, there were still occasional concerns regarding the African language papers about such aspects as inconsistent awarding of marks, spelling mistakes, incorrect phrasing of questions, inaccurate answers in the memorandum, unclear visual texts, the use of non-standard vocabulary, and poor translation of terminology.

There was also some concern about the selection and translation of texts; however, this did not appear to be widespread. The major concern is that the papers are generally too easy, do not have a sufficient degree of cognitive challenge and do not always discriminate accurately between students of high and low ability.

Examiners seem to experience difficulty in setting inferential comprehension, evaluation and appreciation questions consistently on Paper 1, and even among the evaluation teams there is disagreement about how questions should be categorised.

With regard to the utility of the instrument, the evaluators felt that although Barrett's taxonomy is appropriate for assessing the cognitive challenge of Paper 2 and Sections A and B of Paper 1, it cannot be applied effectively to Section C of Paper 1 or to Paper 3. It was suggested that Bloom's taxonomy would work better for the latter.

Although Paper 4 (school-based assessment of oral proficiency) was not included in this study, there is a need for Umalusi to formally evaluate the quality this paper.

Conclusion

To conclude, from a technical perspective, the standards of the NSC HL examinations appear to have improved between 2008 and 2011. The evaluation reveals better balanced papers and, in some cases, more challenging ones. However, the degree of cognitive challenge of Paper 1 is generally too low with a preponderance of lower order questions and too few inferential ones. There appears to be considerable inconsistency from year to year and across the languages with regard to evaluation and appreciation questions.

The examination results indicate that, with the exception of English, the pass rates and mean scores are too high, suggesting that papers might not have been set at a sufficiently high standard. The study also reveals that standards are not consistent throughout the 11 HLs. The English examination appears to be set at a higher standard than the other HLs. There are a number of reasons for this, the most significant of which is that the curriculum is premised on an international model, which privileges English. There is thus a community of practice in the teaching and assessment of English which has a good fit with the new NSC examination.

The transition from the Senior Certificate (SC) to the NSC seems to be proceeding fairly well. The examinations now comply technically with the SAGs in terms of the structure and layout of the papers. The next step is to work towards greater consistency of standards throughout all the languages. However, consideration also needs to be given to the extent of standardization required. The structural and sociolinguistic differences between the languages also need to be recognized.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- A statistical item analysis should be carried out to complement the qualitative evaluation. The information obtained could be used: 1) to assist examiners, moderators and evaluators in assessing the accuracy of their judgments with regard to the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive challenge of questions; 2) to set up a bank of questions illustrating the different degrees of difficulty and levels of cognitive challenge; and 3) to refine the evaluation instrument.
- Further research should be carried out on the standards of assessment in Paper 4.
- There should be annual meetings of examiners, moderators and evaluators at which feedback is provided on the outcomes of the examination. These meetings should be documented in order to systematically improve the quality of the NSC HL examinations
- A handbook should be developed for examiners, moderators and evaluators explaining, for example, the purpose of examinations, and how to set questions at different levels of cognitive challenge and degrees of difficulty to ensure that examinations achieve their purpose. The handbook should include examples of questions at varying degrees of difficulty and levels of cognitive demand in all eleven languages.
- Barrett's taxonomy cannot be applied effectively to all papers and sections of papers; the decision already taken to revise the instrument is therefore supported.
- Where necessary, appropriate texts should be developed in African languages, for example, to support the teaching and assessment of visual, media and critical literacy. Those developing the texts should strive towards authenticity in terms of the language in question.
- Research programmes should be set up in the field of language assessment in the public examination system. These programmes could be located at Umalusi and/or universities.

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to determine whether the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive demand of the 11 Home Language (HL) National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations are equivalent throughout languages and years. This is necessary to ensure the quality of the examination system.

There is an educational requirement to ensure equivalence in the standard of the HL examinations, since all HLs are weighted equally towards the awarding of the NSC. It is important, too, to recognize that the NSC HL examinations have a wash back effect (Pan 2009) on the teaching of languages, and thus affect the quality of language education in schools, particularly in Grades 10 – 12.

1.1 Structure of the report

The report considers the following:

- what motivated the study
- the sociolinguistic context of HL teaching in South Africa
- trends in the examination results
- the nature of the HL NSC examinations
- the link between this research and Umalusi's quality assurance mandate
- the methodology employed in the study
- the results of the study and analysis
- summative discussion and recommendations.

1.2 Aims of the study

This study is situated within the broader Umalusi *Maintaining Standards* research project, initiated in 2008 when the new NSC was first introduced. The purpose of the project was to maintain standards in the period of transition from the old Senior Certificate (SC) to the NSC.

The aim of the present study is to evaluate the quality of the HL examinations written by Grade 12 learners between 2008 and 2011 in all 11 official languages. Concern has been raised about trends in the examination results showing that some of the 11 HLs examined have very high pass rates.

The central questions informing the research are:

- What are the standards of the HL examinations administered to South African Grade 12 learners between 2008 and 2011?
- Are the standards consistent throughout the 11 official HLs and, if not, in what respects do they differ?

The standards are examined in terms of the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive demand of the examination papers.

This Report focuses on the main findings of the study and the trends identified. Separate, more detailed reports on each HL papers have also been produced.

1.3 The sociolinguistic context of Home Language teaching in South Africa

Although there are now 11 official languages, nine of which are indigenous, this has not always been the case. The status of indigenous languages relative to English and Afrikaans reflects South Africa's colonial and apartheid history.

English has been an official language in South Africa since 1910 and Afrikaans since 1925, and over an extended period of time they have achieved national reach and status. Although Afrikaans is a relatively young language, substantial resources were invested in its development by the Nationalist government to enable it to be used at all levels of the socio-economic system. In contrast, it was only in 1996, with the transition to a constitutional democracy, that official status was also accorded to the nine African languages: isiXhosa, isiZulu, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, Tshivenda, isiNdebele, Siswati and Xitsonga (Constitution of South Africa 1996).

This history has influenced the status and reach of languages within the education system. Prior to 1994, it was compulsory, on the one hand, for all learners throughout the country to study English and Afrikaans as either first or second languages. African languages, on the other hand, were only studied regionally as first languages (largely in the Apartheid 'homelands'), and occasionally as third languages. This contributed to the entrenchment of English and Afrikaans as national languages and languages of education, while African languages – spoken by the majority of the population – were relegated to the status of 'minor' languages.

Partly as a consequence of colonialism, English has become a global language with access to a vast range of texts. Although there are fewer texts in Afrikaans, the full range of generic categories (novels, non-fiction, newspapers, magazines, etc.) is available. For African languages, however, the range of texts is more limited, especially in the case of minority languages such as isiNdebele. The range is less restricted for widely spoken languages such as isiZulu, which has several newspapers including *Isolezwe* with a circulation of over 100 000 copies per day (Marketing Web 2010). Literature in the form of novels, drama and poetry in African languages tends to be written for consumption in the education system rather than for a wider market (Opland 2011).

Since 1994, the year of the first democratic election, English has become the de facto language of record in South Africa. Although African languages are widely used for purposes of oral communication, English is mainly used for reading and writing, especially in formal contexts such as business, education and government. Diglossia (Fishman 1971; Wright 2004) is becoming the norm; for example, a school staff meeting may be held in Setswana but the agenda and minutes are likely to be written in English.

Despite the constitutional imperative to promote equity amongst languages and to redress the situation of indigenous languages, English and Afrikaans continue to be used as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Further Education and Training (FET) and at tertiary level, whereas the use of African Languages as LoLT is restricted mainly to the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3). As can be seen from the table below, in Grades 10, 11 and 12 well over 90% of students are learning either English or Afrikaans. For speakers of African languages, this provides opportunities to develop bilingual capabilities, but it may also impact on the development of academic literacy in their HLs.

Table 1: Percentage of learners by LoLT and Grade: 2007

Percentage of learners by LoLT and Grade: 2007												
LoLT	Gr 1	Gr 2	Gr 3	Gr 4	Gr 5	Gr 6	Gr 7	Gr 8	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12
Afrikaans	9.5	9.6	9.9	12.3	12.2	12.2	13.2	13.1	14.0	12.7	12.1	12.8
English	21.8	23.8	27.7	79.1	81,1	81.6	80.9	80.9	80.0	81.2	82.0	81.4
Sepedi	8.3	9.1	9.2	1.1	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.0
Sesotho	4.7	4.8	4.4	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.3
Setswana	7.5	7.4	6.8	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.3
IsiNdebele	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
IsiXhosa	16.5	15.0	14.0	3.1	2.5	2.0	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.5
IsiZulu	23.4	21.7	20.1	1.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1
Siswati	2.1	2.1	1.7	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Tshivenda	2.2	2.4	2.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5
Xitsonga	3.1	3.3	3.1	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Department of Basic Education 2010)

The use of a language as a LoLT has implications first, for the relative amount of exposure learners have to their HL and FAL at school. English or Afrikaans speaking students using their HL as LoLT will be exposed to their HL, both orally and in written form throughout the school day, not only in the language class. However, African language speakers using English as their LoLT in the FET will only be exposed to their HL for 4 ½ hours per week, in the language class.[1] Secondly, English and Afrikaans speakers will be exposed to an academic register in their HL; they will be reading their subject textbooks and doing a substantial amount of writing in their HL. African languages speakers, in contrast, will not have equivalent opportunities to develop academic literacy in their HLs.

All these factors are likely to impact on learners' scholastic achievement in their HLs and thus their performance in the final school leaving examinations. They may impact, too, on the nature of the examinations themselves. For example, English and Afrikaans speakers are likely to have been exposed to a greater variety of written texts, and the examiners have a greater range of texts from which to choose. Similarly, because African languages have not been used for academic purposes in Further and Higher Education, an academic meta-language may not be widely familiar to those teaching in African languages; for example, concepts such as 'inferential comprehension' may not be a natural part of the HL discourse. The context is therefore not as supportive for developing the kind of critical and close reading skills typically associated with the English examinations.

These socio-political factors impact, too, on whether or not the HL examinations for each official language are distributed equitably across the provinces. As can be seen from Table 2 below, the languages with the largest enrolment are isiZulu and English, with 110 100 candidates and 87 785 candidates, respectively. As English is only spoken as an HL by 8.2% of the population (Statistics South Africa 2003), a substantial number of these candidates are likely to be speakers of African languages.

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[1]In classes where there is a significant amount of code-switching, African language speakers will be exposed to their HL in oral form more often throughout the school day but not necessarily to the written language.

Table 2: Average number of students writing each HL examination annually by province: 2008 – 2011

	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng	KwaZulu-Natal	Limpopo	Mpuma-langa	North West	Northern Cape	Western Cape	Total
Afrikaans	4153	3 492	12 154	1 027	1 394	2 490	2 932	4 500	17 290	49 432
English	7 095	2 903	29 200	25 044	1 940	3 319	2 391	952	14 941	87 785
Sepedi		8	6 825		43 045	5 270	3			55 151
Sesotho	972	15 696	7 724	30		149	553	17	64	25 205
Setswana		1 564	8 774		468	1 062	20 037	3 075	6	34 986
IsiNdebele			23		37	3 265				3 325
IsiXhosa	42 596	628	3 040	2 055	3	48	384	442	8 283	57 479
IsiZulu	4	681	14 700	85 825	752	8 132	4		2	110 100
Siswati			18	12		13 770	1	1	2	13 804
Tshivenda			614		13 725	2				14 341
Xitsonga		20	1 749		12 194	6 777				20 740

(Source: Umalusi Certification Database 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011)

This table shows that English and Afrikaans, being taught and examined in all provinces, have a wider distribution than the nine indigenous languages. IsiXhosa also features in all provinces, but with very small numbers in two of them. IsiZulu, Sesotho and Setswana are taught to significant numbers of students and examined in five or six provinces, and Sepedi and Xitsonga in three provinces. IsiNdebele, Siswati and Tshivenda are restricted to specific provinces. Tshivenda is taught and examined mainly in Limpopo but also in Gauteng.

IsiNdebele and Siswati are restricted almost exclusively to Mpumalanga, a province without a university that could provide for research and development in these minority languages. English stands out as a language with a large number of candidates and national distribution. However, as mentioned above, not every learner who writes an English Home Language examination uses it as their main language at home.

All these sociolinguistic disparities should be seen in the context of the massive inequalities in South African education. This is reflected in a distribution of educational achievement that has been described as bimodal (Fleisch 2008; van der Berg 2008; Taylor & Yu 2009; Taylor 2011). Essentially, two systems are seen to be operating, one relatively advantaged in which achievement is satisfactory, and the other disadvantaged in which achievement is poor. Taylor maintains that, 'The majority of South Africa's students (80-85%) are located in the historically disadvantaged system and demonstrate very low proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy' (2011: 4). The likelihood is that most learners studying African languages as HLs are disadvantaged, while many learners studying English as HL are in an advantageous position.

The next section discusses the trends in the Home Language examination results between 2008 and 2011.

1.4 Trends in the examination results across the languages (2008 – 2011)

The purpose of this section is to compare the performance of students in the eleven HLs. The section begins by comparing the average performance of students by language and province over the four year period. Thereafter, the trends in distribution of marks are compared within the language and are illustrated with graphs pertaining to the year 2010.

Table 3: Four-year average learner performance in HL examinations: 2008 – 2011

	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng	KwaZulu-Natal	Limpopo	Mpuma-langa	North -West	Northern Cape	Western Cape	National Average
Afrikaans	51.8	58.4	61.8	61.7	63.7	63.2	64.3	50.1	54.8	**55.5**
English	52.1	50.4	55.0	58.1	49.3	49.5	51.6	55.7	54.2	**53.0**
Sepedi		56.5	52.7		60.7	61.9	48.5			**57.4**
Sesotho	61.2	54.8	57.0	56.6		57.8	54.6	55.1	56.2	**52.9**
Setswana		54.8	55.6		56.2	63.6	59.3	55.0	62.1	**55.7**
IsiNdebele			58.5		65.3	66.9				**64.4**
IsiXhosa	60.7	60.3	57.6				57.8	58.3	60.4	**59.5**
IsiZulu	68.1	49.4	60.1	63.7	58.5	51.6	51.9		55.0	**60.0**
Siswati			64.4	67.7		85.1	33.0	53.0	59.0	**61.7**
Tshivenda			56.7		65.4	53.3				**63.4**
Xitsonga		58.7	53.8		66.2	64.3				**62.7**

(Source: Umalusi Certification Data 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011)

As can be seen, there is a substantial gap of over 10% between the lowest and highest four-year averages for learner performance. IsiNdebele is the language with the highest four-year average of 64.4%, followed by Tshivenda (63.4%) and Xitsonga (62.7%). Sesotho has the lowest four-year average of 52.9%, followed by English (53%) and Afrikaans (55.5%). The following languages registered a four-year average of 60% and above: isiNdebele (64.4%), Tshivenda (63.4%), Xitsonga (62.7), Siswati (61.7%) and isiZulu (60%).

English, Afrikaans and the Sotho group of languages (Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi) have four-year averages between 52.9% and 55.6%. Although these averages are in a similar range, there are some differences in the distribution of marks. The results for English are consistent from 2008 to 2010, showing a fairly normal distribution curve. Afrikaans has a similar distribution to that of English in 2008 (in fact, the results suggest that the examination may have been slightly more difficult), but since then the results for Afrikaans have become skewed slightly to the right suggesting that the examination might be getting easier. The Sotho languages have a fairly similar comparative distribution curve. As the graph for 2010 below shows, marks are skewed to the right of English, whereas Setswana and Sesotho have their most frequent marks in the 50%-59% range; and for Sepedi the most frequent marks are in the 60-69% range.

Comparison of mark distribution

	0-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-100
ENGHL2010	2.7%	13.0%	27.0%	27.3%	18.4%	8.9%	2.6%
SEPHL2010	0.4%	2.3%	12.2%	32.5%	36.4%	14.8%	1.5%
SESHL2010	0.4%	3.2%	18.0%	40.9%	30.4%	6.6%	0.4%
SETHL2010	0.2%	2.0%	14.1%	40.6%	36.5%	6.4%	0.2%
AFRHL2010	0.6%	6.6%	23.2%	28.3%	22.2%	13.7%	5.4%
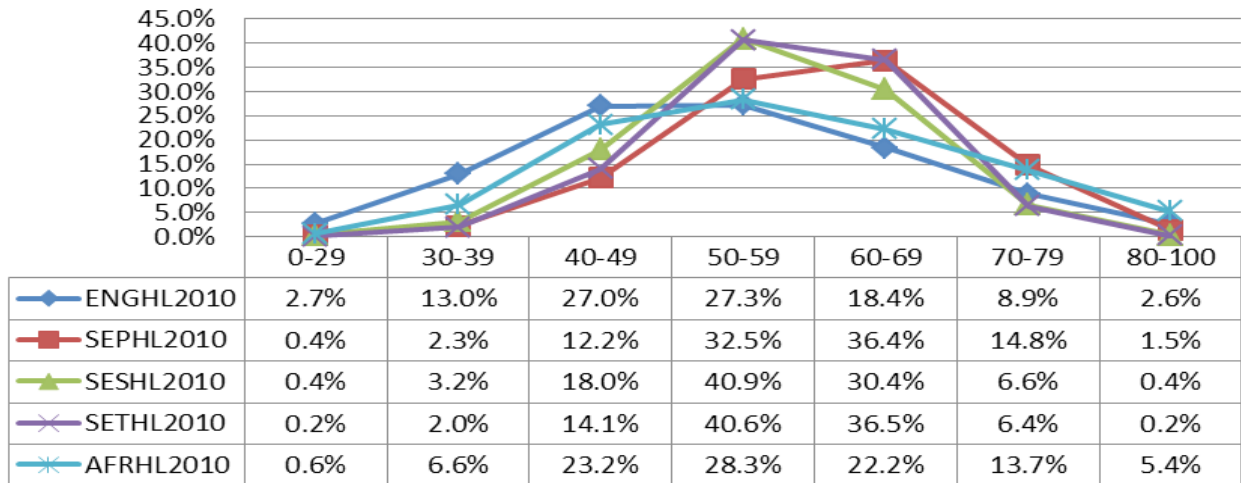
Figure 1: Comparison of distribution of marks for Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Afrikaans and English: 2010

The Nguni languages, Siswati, isiXhosa and isiZulu, all have four-year performance averages of approximately 60% (isiNdebele is also an Nguni language but has a higher average). As Figure 2 below illustrates, these languages have a similar distribution of marks skewed to the right of English with the highest frequency of marks between 60% and 69%.

Comparison of mark distribution

	0-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-100
ENGHL2010	2.7%	13.0%	27.0%	27.3%	18.4%	8.9%	2.6%
XHOHL2010	0.2%	1.3%	10.5%	36.5%	42.4%	9.0%	0.2%
ZULHL2010	0.3%	1.5%	6.6%	19.1%	37.4%	30.3%	4.7%
SWAHL2010	0.5%	1.0%	5.4%	21.3%	40.6%	27.3%	4.0%

Figure 2: Comparison of distribution of marks for Siswati, isiXhosa, isiZulu and English: 2010

Xitsonga, Tshivenda and isiNdebele, all languages with a relatively small number of speakers, have the highest four-year performance averages of between 62.7% and 64.4%. As Figure 3 below illustrates, these languages have a similar distribution of marks skewed to the right of English with the highest frequency of marks between 60% and 69%.

Comparison of mark distribution
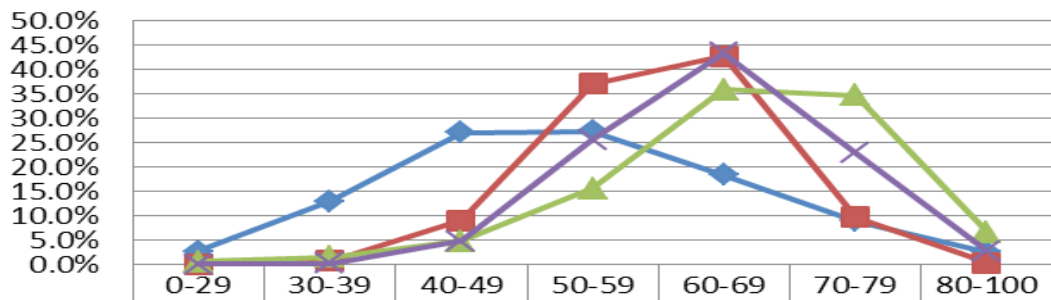
	0-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-100
ENGHL2010	2.7%	13.0%	27.0%	27.3%	18.4%	8.9%	2.6%
TSVHL2010	0.1%	0.8%	9.1%	37.1%	42.8%	9.7%	0.4%
XITHL2010	0.6%	1.6%	4.8%	15.7%	35.9%	34.7%	6.7%
NDBHL2010	0.2%	0.2%	4.9%	25.6%	43.5%	22.9%	2.7%

Figure 3: Comparison of distribution of marks for Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele and English: 2010

In conclusion, English and Afrikaans reveal similar pass rates in 2008, but subsequently Afrikaans seems to have become easier. The Sotho languages have four-year performance averages in a range similar to that of English and Afrikaans; however, Sesotho has the lowest performance average of all the languages, suggesting that it might be a challenging examination. By contrast, Sepedi has a slightly higher performance average. The Sotho languages have similar patterns of distribution. The three Nguni languages which have been grouped together – Siswati, isiXhosa and isiZulu – have a somewhat higher four-year performance average than the Sotho group and a fairly similar pattern of distribution to each other. IsiNdebele, Xitsonga and Tshivenda – all minority languages – have the highest four year performance averages.

It has been suggested by some evaluation teams[2] that the average marks for African languages are high, because learners speak their HLs and know them well, whereas the majority of candidates who write English HL do not speak the language at home. Although this is a plausible explanation, there are several reasons why it does not fully account for the excessively high marks. First, it does not explain the lower marks in Afrikaans, Sesotho and Setswana. Secondly, candidates writing in English HL are using English as their LoLT and therefore have greater opportunity to develop English literacy than students taking an African Language as HL who only study their language for 50 minutes per day. Finally, in the PIRLS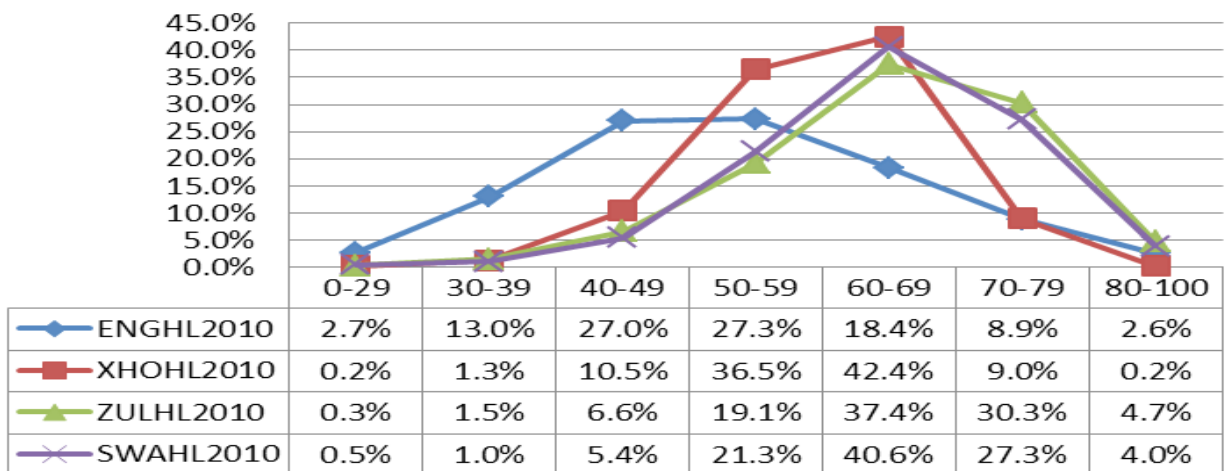 study (Mullis et al. 2006), Grade 4 and 5 learners assessed in English and Afrikaans (including those writing in their additional languages) achieved higher marks for reading comprehension than those assessed in African languages.

The more likely reason for the excessively high average marks in some African languages is that the examinations are too easy. Another plausible explanation supplied by the isiNdebele team is that for this language there are few set works available and questions are similar from year to year. Teachers teach to the previous question papers and drill the answers; learners know them off by heart.

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[2]At an Evaluation workshop in November 2011

1.5 The Home Language examinations

1.5.1 How the current examinations evolved

There is a history in South Africa of separate syllabuses and examinations for Languages, in the context of which different communities of practice have evolved with different assumptions, not only about standards, but also about the purposes of language teaching and assessment.

In 1969, separate syllabuses for English and Afrikaans were introduced for the first time. At this stage, African languages had a common syllabus, which according to Prinsloo (2002; 2004) was strongly influenced by the Afrikaans syllabus. In 1989, separate syllabuses were introduced for languages which were at that time referred to as 'Northern Sotho', 'Southern Sotho', 'Tswana', 'Tsonga', 'Venda', 'Xhosa' and 'Zulu'. Syllabuses were not available at this time for 'Ndebele' or 'Swati', as they were not taught in schools.

IsiNdebele, spoken by 1.6% of the South African population (Statistics South Africa 2003), was not standardized until 1982. It only began to be taught as a school subject and used as a LoLT in 1985 (Mahlangu 2007) after the apartheid 'homeland' of KwaNdebele was established in 1984. IsiNdebele has a very limited amount of literature, most of which dates from that period (Kwintessential 2012). Although it did not become a university subject until 1997 (Lepota 2012), isiNdebele is now offered at three South African universities. Although Siswati is also a minority language spoken by 2.7% of the population, it benefits from its proximity to Swaziland where the language has been developed for educational purposes and numerous works of prose, poetry and drama have been produced.

In the past, Afrikaans and African languages had a greater focus on grammar and phonology than English, both drawing on structural linguistics and a formalistic approach to literature – a 'scientific' approach (Prinsloo 2002; 2004; Prinsloo & Janks 2002). Prinsloo suggests that this was because African languages and Afrikaans were newly standardized languages. Fundamental pedagogics (an educational philosophy associated with apartheid education) and the requirements of university curricula also exerted an influence. In the examinations prior to 1994, African languages allocated more marks to the assessment of grammar and fewer to the assessment of reading comprehension than either Afrikaans or English. There was no summary in the African languages paper, and the questions on the literature were, in the main, limited to the literal.

By contrast, English was strongly influenced by the British curriculum and tended to teach and examine grammar contextually, using a wide range of texts, including media texts. The emphasis on literature was on the close reading of a text, involving questioning, redefining, discriminating and judging – the aim of which was to interrogate the surface meaning of texts. Higher order cognitive skills were required. Learners were encouraged to express themselves and creativity was highly valued. By 1995, Afrikaans – and to a lesser extent, African languages – were drawing closer to the English model, but they retained aspects of earlier syllabuses. They were still essentially structural and skills based (Prinsloo 2002).

In 1997, a common curriculum was introduced for all the newly proclaimed 11 official languages. This curriculum was conceptualized in English. It was outcomes based, and influenced by Anglophone countries such as Australia and the predominantly English speaking provinces of Canada. In 2001, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) was introduced to streamline and strengthen the curriculum. It provided a common set of

standards for teaching and assessing languages, conceptualized in English and 'versioned' into the other languages. Also in 2001, Government Gazette No. 22615 was published (South Africa, Department of Education 2001); this was a national policy document designed to ensure uniformity in the teaching and assessment of all 11 official languages. All languages were to be offered on both the Higher and Standard Grade; teaching was to be communicative and outcomes based; the same number of set works was to be studied in each language and the same components examined. Language study in African languages (Paper 1) could still include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and vocabulary but with focus on meaning, function and use. Language study was not specified for Afrikaans or English. The Language paper was broken down as follows: Comprehension 30 marks; Summary 10 marks; Communicative language study 40 marks; Editing 10 marks.

In 2008, the first 'common' Grade 12 examination – the NSC – was set nationally although in that year Paper 2 (the Literature paper) was still set provincially for all languages. With the introduction of the NSC, there were no longer separate examinations for Higher and Standard Grades. Thus it has become important that the new examination is able to distinguish between extremely high achieving students (those who would have achieved an A Grade on the SC Higher Grade papers) and students performing at much lower levels (those who would have passed on the SC Standard Grade papers). For this reason the current Subject Assessment Guidelines (SAGs) specify the cognitive levels and types of questions.

The way in which the examinations have evolved has implications for current practice. African languages, Afrikaans and English had separate syllabi for a significant period of time and, as mentioned above, different communities of practice developed in relation to both teaching and assessment. English was able to a draw on a curriculum tradition common to Anglophone countries and a wide range of texts, which supported the development of its curriculum and examinations. This enabled the English curriculum to benchmark itself against international standards. Afrikaans and African languages, in contrast, were more insular, developing curricula that were influenced by their more recent standardization and driven to a greater degree by language boards and university language departments. Minority languages, in particular isiNdebele, had challenges with regard to the range of set works available, as already noted.

Since 1994, there has been pressure, for reasons of equity, for a common curriculum. From 2001, we have had such a curriculum referenced to international standards, particularly those of Anglophone countries. The transition to the new curriculum has been challenging for African languages and to a lesser degree for Afrikaans, since it requires them to give up taken for granted ways of doing things and some elements of their practice which they see as central, for example, the teaching of structural grammar. African languages have also had to cope with new elements in their practice, for example, visual and media literacy, and the setting of higher order question and summaries. According to one group of evaluators, examiners find it difficult to set higher order questions and students find it difficult to answer them.

1.5.2 NSC Home Language assessment structure

The NSC HL examination is structured as laid out in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Structure of the NSC Home Language examinations

Examination paper	Content of paper		Marks
Paper 1	**Language in context**		
	Comprehension: Passages(s), visual texts/graphics, explanations, descriptions, etc.	30	**70**
	Summary: Summarizing in point or paragraph form	10	
	Language: Advertisements, cartoons, prose texts, structures, critical awareness, reports, descriptions, procedures, explanations, etc.	30	
Paper 2	**Literature**		
	Seen and unseen poetry: Essay + contextual questions or two contextual questions + essay or contextual question (unseen poetry)	30	**80**
	Novel: Essay or contextual question	25	
	Drama: Essay or contextual question	25	
Paper 3:	**Creative writing**		
	Essay: Narrative, descriptive, reflective, argumentative, expository or discursive	50	**100**
	Longer transactional text: Newspaper article, diary, memorandum, minutes and agenda, letter, etc.	30	
	Shorter text : Flyers, instructions, advertisements, postcards, posters, etc.	20	
			250
Paper 4	**Oral:** Reading, prepared or unprepared speech, conversation or debate, interview, etc.		**50**
	Sub-total		**300**
Programme of assessment (CASS)	14 tasks (900 divided by 9)		**100**
Total for Home Language examination			**400**

As indicated, the examination comprises external and internal components, which together give a total of 400 marks. The external component (Papers 1 – 4) is marked out of 300, of which 50 marks are allocated for the oral tasks undertaken during the year. The four papers contribute 75% to the final NSC mark. The remaining 25% is made up of a *Programme of Assessment*, otherwise known as Continuous Assessment (CASS), consisting of 14 tasks which are all internally assessed by schools (Department of Education 2008: 11).

Of the three papers (Papers 1 - 3), only Paper 1 contains no choice of questions. In other words, candidates answer all questions in this paper. In Paper 2, learners must answer a total

of five (5) questions. From Section A, they choose any two (2) questions from a total of four (4) in the prescribed (seen) poetry section and then choose between an essay or a contextual question, both of which are based on unseen poetry. In Section B (novel), learners choose between an essay and a contextual question, both of which are based on the novel that has been studied by the particular learner during the year. In the drama section, the choice is also between an essay and a contextual question on the prescribed play studied by the learner and taught in class. The choices in the novel and drama sections contribute a total of 25 marks each towards the total of the whole paper. In some languages, there is a condition attached to the novel and drama choices. For example, if learners answer an essay question in Section B, they are compelled to answer a contextual question from Section C and vice versa. Candidates must select one question from each of the three sections in Paper 3.

In order to pass the examination, candidates must achieve an overall mark of 40%. To be awarded a distinction, they must achieve an overall mark of 80%.

1.6 The link between this research and Umalusi's quality assurance mandate

To date, Umalusi has conducted several studies into the standards of the qualifications, curricula and their associated examinations that reside in levels 1 – 4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The different studies have investigated, amongst other aspects, issues such as the standards in the SC examination, comparability of school and college subjects, the standards of selected South African SC subjects in comparison with the same subjects from selected African countries, the comparability of the South African Foundation Phase curriculum with the curricula of high performing countries, and the comparability of the curricula and examinations of the old SC with the new NSC.

The findings of these studies are summarized in a recent document entitled *All the cattle in the kraal*: *An overview of Umalusi's research, 2003 – 2011*. Key lessons learnt from the studies relate to issues such as what is meant by standards and how they should be measured. The studies have also enabled Umalusi to gain a richer understanding of the nature and quality of qualifications, curricula and associated examinations that fall within Umalusi's sub-framework (NQF levels 1 – 4). In addition, the research has assisted with the development and continuous refinement of examination evaluation instruments.

A closer look at *All the cattle in the kraal* reveals that almost all Umalusi studies have thus far focused on content subjects situated in the higher levels of the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Framework (GFETQF), and Grade 12 in particular. However, aside from English First Additional Language (FAL) examinations, there has been no research-driven process to investigate the standards of HL examinations in the education system in general, and at Grade 12 level in particular.

Over the past few years, Umalusi's Assessment Standards Committee (ASC) has been concerned about the results of some of the indigenous African languages' HL examinations. In particular, the concern is in relation to the high pass rates for minority languages such as isiNdebele, Siswati, Xitsonga and Tshivenda. Unlike other official languages, almost all candidates writing HL examinations in these languages are passing. This is why Umalusi has identified the need to investigate the standard and quality of Grade 12 HL examinations. As stated in Section 1.2 above, this research is situated within the broader Umalusi *Maintaining Standards* research project, which was initiated in 2008 when the NSC examination was first

introduced. The purpose of the project was to maintain standards in the period of transition from the SC to the NSC. The following reports have already been produced:

(i) Comparative Analysis of the National Senior Certificate Home Language, 2008 – 2010: Afrikaans; English; isiNdebele; isiXhosa; isiZulu; and Siswati – In this study the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive demand of examinations in the following six languages were investigated and compared: Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Siswati. The instrument used was the revised version of the Bloom's Taxonomy as developed by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001).

(ii) Comparative analysis of the National Senior Certificate Home Language examinations, 2008 – 2011: Individual Language Report – Using an Umalusi instrument based on Barrett's Taxonomy, this study compared the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive demand of HL examination papers in each of the eleven official languages.

(iii) The 'challenge' of cognitive demand: developing a framework for assessing and comparing the cognitive challenge of home language examinations (2011) – This study evaluated different taxonomies used to categorize the cognitive demand of HL examination questions. It considered ways in which Umalusi's current framework could be made more suitable for evaluating HL examination papers.

2. Methods used to analyse Home Language examinations

2.1 Home Language examinations analysed

All eleven HL examinations were analysed: Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga.

2.2 Documentation used

The following documents were used in the analysis:

- Individual reports of the eleven HL evaluation teams
- Notes taken during team meetings as part of the study
- Guidelines for the setting of Grade 12 examinations in Languages in Grades 10 – 12 (Home Languages): Papers 1-3 (Department of Education 2009a, b, c)
- Subject Assessment Guidelines (Department of Education 2008)
- 2008 – 2011 HL examination papers (Papers 1-3) and associated memoranda
- Comparative analysis of the National Senior Certificate Home Language examinations, 2008 – 2010 (Umalusi 2011b)
- The 'challenge' of cognitive demand: Developing a framework for assessing and comparing the cognitive challenge of home languages examinations: Parts 1 & 2 (Umalusi 2012a & b)

2.3 Umalusi instrument used to analyse the Home Language examinations

In evaluating the HL examination papers, the researchers used an instrument based on Barrett's taxonomy (see Appendix 1). In terms of the SAGs developed internally by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), an HL examination should be set in such a way that the various types of cognitive demand are catered for as shown in Table 5 below. Barrett's Taxonomy is specifically designed to set questions to assess reading comprehension and provides criteria to construct and evaluate the cognitive level of questions. It assumes that each level subsumes the previous one and has a higher level of cognitive demand. A summary of the taxonomy is provided below:

Table 5: Summary of Barrett's Taxonomy

Type of cognitive demand	What questions require of the student/examinee
1. Literal Comprehension Recognition or recall of - details - main ideas - a sequence - comparison - cause and effect relationships - character traits	To locate or identify any kind of explicitly stated fact or detail (for example, names of characters or places, likeness and differences, reasons for actions) in a reading selection/text/material.
2. Reorganization - classifying - outlining - summarising - synthesising	To organize, sort into categories, paraphrase or consolidate explicitly stated information or ideas in a reading selection/text/material.
3. Inferential Comprehension - main ideas - supporting details - sequence - comparisons - cause and effect relationships - character traits - predicting outcomes - interpreting figurative language	To use conjecture, personal intuition, experience, background knowledge, or clues in a reading selection/text/material as a basis of forming hypotheses and inferring details or ideas (for example, the significance of a theme, the motivation or nature of a character) which are *not explicitly stated* in the reading selection/text/material.
4. Evaluation Judgment of - reality or fantasy - fact or opinion - adequacy or validity - appropriateness - worth, desirability and acceptability	To make evaluative judgement (for example, on qualities of accuracy, acceptability, desirability, worth or probability) by comparing information or ideas presented in a reading selection/text/material using external criteria provided (by other sources/authorities) or internal criteria (students' own values, experiences, or background knowledge of the subject).
5. Appreciation - emotional response to content - identification with characters - reactions to author's language use - imagery	To show emotional and aesthetic/literary sensitivity to the reading selection/text/material and show a reaction to the worth of its psychological and artistic elements (including literary techniques, forms, styles, and structuring).

The Guidelines for the setting of Grade 12 examinations in Languages for Papers 1 and 2, which include comprehension questions, set out the proportions required of each question type in Barrett's Taxonomy. However, no taxonomy is provided for the assessment of language study (grammar) or writing.

Table 6: Proportion of marks to be allocated to different cognitive levels of questioning

Cognitive levels based on Barrett's Taxonomy	Proportions of marks
1. Literal Comprehension	Lower level 40% of total marks
2. Reorganization	
3. Inferential Comprehension	Medium level 40% of total marks
4. Evaluation	Higher level 20% of total marks
5. Appreciation	

2.4 Teams of evaluators

Umalusi appointed a team of researchers for each of the eleven HLs. Each team had four researchers, normally consisting of a university subject methodology specialist with at least five years' experience; a subject advisor with no less than five years' experience; and two teachers with at least five years Grade 12 teaching experience. The names of the researchers are listed in the acknowledgement section of this report.

In order to familiarize the researchers with the new examination analysis instrument based on Barrett's Taxonomy, two workshops were conducted. At the initial workshop in June 2011, the researchers were introduced to the new instrument and used this to evaluate the 2008 – 2010 examination papers, which had previously been evaluated using an instrument based on Bloom's Taxonomy. At the second workshop held immediately after the final examinations had been written in November, the researchers evaluated the 2011 papers using the same instrument.

2.5 Specific aspects of the examinations covered by the Umalusi examination analysis instrument

The researchers were required to conduct an item analysis of the examination papers, evaluating the cognitive demand, the degree of difficulty and the content/skill/topic of each item on the paper, using Umalusi's adapted version of Barrett's Taxonomy. This information was entered on an excel spread sheet for further analysis.

The researchers were asked to make judgments about:

- the examination papers' compliance with the SAGs
- the comparability of the examinations from 2008 to 2011.

They were also asked to:

- identify examination papers which were good models
- evaluate the standard, quality, language and format of the papers
- make recommendations for improvement of the examination papers
- reflect on the suitability of the evaluation instrument.

2.6 Limitations of the study

It is acknowledged that the research has a number of limitations. It was the first time the new instrument had been used to evaluate the examination papers, and some problems with the instrument were revealed. First, Barrett's Taxonomy was originally designed to assess reading comprehension and it did not work as effectively to evaluate the cognitive demand of language study (Paper 1) and writing (Paper 3). Secondly, the complexity of the instrument, which involved ranking each cognitive process in terms of 3 levels of difficulty, may have led to some mechanical responses on the part of the evaluators. Finally, the nature of the texts used in the examination papers (their complexity and length) contributed to their degree of difficulty and the instrument did not account for this (see Section 3.7 below).

A further limitation is that the interpretation of the categories in the instrument is subjective. As noted in Section 1.4.1, the English, Afrikaans and African language curricula and examinations have had separate and different histories. It is not surprising, therefore, that evaluation teams would tend to interpret the categories of questions in slightly different ways. This problem may have been exacerbated by relatively small number of researchers in each team.

A particular problem arose with Papers 2 (Literature) and 3 (Writing), in which candidates are given choices of questions. Evaluators therefore had to take account of different routes which candidates might take through the paper, which made it difficult to draw firm conclusions with regard to the cognitive challenge and degree of difficulty of the paper as a whole.

Finally, one also has to take account of the fact that Barrett's Taxonomy, as with many other taxonomies, is theory driven rather than empirically based. As Thatham (1978) has pointed out, 'comprehension taxonomies have been devised by logic rather than by empirical research' (p. 191). There is no evidence, for example, to show that appreciative questions are more cognitively challenging than inferential questions. In this regard, it is instructive to look at the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Report (Mullis et al. 2006), in which questions are analysed qualitatively in terms of their cognitive demand and statistically in terms of the percentage of learners who were able to answer them correctly. This provides for a more balanced view of the degree of difficulty of individual questions and papers.

3. Results and analysis

3.1 Compliance of examination papers with SAGs

As mentioned in Section 2.3 above, the SAGs use Barrett's Taxonomy to indicate the required level of cognitive challenge for Paper 1, Section A, and Paper 2 only. There is no mention of degree of difficulty. However, in this study all sections of all three papers have been qualitatively evaluated with regard to both difficulty and cognitive challenges using the adapted version of Barrett's Taxonomy (see Appendix 1).

3.2 Weighting of degree of difficulty

Afrikaans – Paper 1 in 2008 was seen by the evaluators to be closest to the ideal in terms of overall degree of difficulty. However, in general, there were too many easy questions on Paper 1, relating particularly to the questions on grammar, according to the evaluators. On occasion the comprehension texts were perceived as too simple, and there was no option to write the summary as a paragraph. The examination was seen to get progressively easier in 2009 and 2010; 2011 was considered to be of a better standard but still too easy. In Paper 2 the level of the questions was considered to be uneven and the set works were seen to differ significantly in length and degree of difficulty.

English – The examination was considered by the evaluation team to be consistently difficult over the four year period. A major contributor to the degree of difficulty on Paper 1 – the language paper - was the complex nature of the texts. With regard to Paper 2 – the literature paper, the evaluators concluded that the degree of difficulty varied depending on the questions that were chosen by the learners, which relate to the set works that had been studied.

Sepedi – With regard to Paper 1, 2008, 2009 and 2011 were perceived by the evaluators as difficult, and 2010 as moderate. With regard to Paper 2, 2008 was judged to be the most difficult. With regard to Paper 2, 2009 was judged to be the most difficult. Overall, the examinations for Sepedi were considered to be difficult.

Sesotho – With regard to Paper 1, 2008 was perceived by the evaluators as easy, 2009 and 2010 as difficult and 2011 as moderate. Paper 2 was analysed section by section and it was not possible to draw general conclusions about the degree of difficulty. The overall impression of Paper 3 was that it was difficult throughout the four year period; 2011 was judged to be the most difficult paper.

Setswana – With regard to Paper 1, 2008 – 2010 were perceived by the evaluators as moderate and 2011 as easy. None of the papers was judged to have challenged the candidates with difficult questions. The evaluators surmised that this might have been because the pass rate had been too low in previous years without any distinctions. Paper 2 was perceived to have been set at an equivalent degree of difficulty throughout the four years. With regard to Paper 3, 2008 was judged as moderate to difficult; and 2009 – 2011 as moderate.

IsiNdebele – Over the four year period the examinations were evaluated as either moderate (2008, 2010 and 2011) or difficult (2009). With regard to Paper 1, 2008 – 2009 were perceived as difficult and 2010 – 2011 were perceived as moderate. Papers 2 and 3 were analysed

section by section; however, it was not possible to draw general conclusions about the degree of difficulty.

IsiXhosa – Various factors were mentioned by the evaluators that may have affected the degree of difficulty of the examinations: in 2008 the comprehension text on Paper 1 was too short and there were no visuals; in 2010 the comprehension text was perceived to disadvantage rural learners, and candidates were offered the alternative of writing the summary as a paragraph or in point form. The evaluators identified the 2008 examination as the most difficult and perceived the 2011 examination as the easiest (low level of cognitive challenge and degree of difficulty). With regard to individual papers, Paper 1 was judged easiest in 2011. Papers 2 and 3 were analysed section by section; however, it is not possible to draw general conclusions about the degree of difficulty.

IsiZulu – The evaluators judged the examination as a whole to be easy, though Paper 2 was seen to be somewhat more difficult than the other two papers. The evaluators suggested that the introduction of multiple choice questions may have contributed to the examination becoming easier.

Siswati – Paper 1 was evaluated as consistently easy, while 2010 was judged to be a more difficult paper than the others; 2009 was judged to be the easiest. Papers 2 and 3 were analysed section by section; however, it was not possible to draw general conclusions about the degree of difficulty. With regard to the difficulty of the examination as a whole, concern was expressed that where choices were provided on Papers 2 and 3, they were not weighted equally.

Tshivenda – With regard to Paper 1, questions were rated by the evaluators as fairly difficult throughout the four year period. However, this was balanced by a low level of cognitive demand resulting in a moderate degree of difficulty. In Paper 2 the essay questions were considered to be more difficult than the contextual questions. With regard to Paper 3, the papers over the four year period were judged to have a fairly similar degree of difficulty. Overall, the examination was judged to be at a similar, moderate degree of difficulty over the four years, although the 2008 examination was seen as somewhat easier and the 2011 examination as slightly more difficult.

Xitsonga – With regard to Paper 1, 2008 was judged to be the most difficult and 2011 the easiest. Paper 2 was analysed section by section and it was not possible to draw general conclusions about the degree of difficulty. Paper 3 was judged to be consistently easy in terms of level of difficulty over the four year period. The overall examination was rated as moderate to fairly difficult.

In conclusion, some of the language examinations appear to vary in their degree of difficulty from year to year. Furthermore, some languages seem to be more difficult than others. This may be because examiners are still getting to grips with the new NSC examination model. It may also reflect the different histories of the language curricula and examinations.

However, one of the challenges of comparing the degree of difficulty of the examinations in this study is the subjective nature of the evaluation. Given their different histories, it is possible that what is interpreted as easy or difficult might vary somewhat from language to language. Thus, whilst the results of the qualitative evaluation may be internally consistent in terms of each language, the consistency with which the instrument has been applied across the languages is not guaranteed. A way forward would be to select key questions that have been identified as easy, moderate or difficult and submit them to a statistical item analysis,

which would reveal the actual degree of difficulty experienced by candidates in answering the questions. The information obtained would be useful to both examiners and evaluators in building understanding of what constitutes difficulty in language examinations.

A further challenge is teasing out the relationship between the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive challenge. As mentioned above, the SAGs address the level of cognitive challenge but not the degree of difficulty. This study reveals that factors other than cognitive challenge influence the degree of difficulty of the paper, for example, the nature and length of texts selected. For languages with a more limited range of texts, the challenge of selecting ones at an appropriate degree of difficulty may be greater. Furthermore, higher order questions in Barrett's Taxonomy (evaluation and appreciation) are not always judged to be the most difficult. Ideally, an examination should have a range of questions at different degrees of difficulty in order to discriminate between different levels of achievement. A statistical item analysis could contribute to a better understanding of this issue, too.

3.3 Weighting of cognitive demand

As shown in Table 6 above, the SAGs require that 40% of marks in Paper 1 (Sections A and B) and Paper 2 should be obtained from questions set at a lower level (literal comprehension and reorganization); a further 40% should be obtained from questions set at a medium level (inferential comprehension); and 20% should be obtained from questions set at a higher level (evaluation and appreciation). The results of the qualitative evaluation of the weighting of cognitive demand are presented for each language below.

Afrikaans – Paper 1 was judged not to comply with the SAGs. Lower level questions (literal comprehension and reorganization) were perceived to be too heavily weighted; there were insufficient inferential comprehension questions though this was seen to improve slightly in 2011, and there were no appreciation questions.

Table 7: Afrikaans Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	56%	83%	40%
Reorganization	27%		40%
Inferential comprehension	14%		40%
Evaluation	3%	3%	20%
Appreciation	0%		

It was difficult for the evaluators to make judgments about Paper 2 because of the choices of questions. Paper 3 complied with SAGs, but again the candidate's choices would determine the level of cognitive challenge experienced. The evaluators felt that the cognitive challenge of Paper 1(with a greater number of lower order questions) and Paper 3 (with more evaluation and appreciation questions) might balance each other out. Thus, overall the 2011 examination was perceived to be not seriously out of line with SAGs.

English – The level of cognitive demand was fairly consistent over the four years. Paper 1 was judged to be compliant with the SAGs, although there were consistently too few literal comprehension and reorganization questions, too many evaluation questions and no appreciation questions. For example, in 2011:

Table 8: English Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	10%	29%	40%
Reorganization	19%		
Inferential comprehension	34%		40%
Evaluation	37%	37%	20%
Appreciation	0%		

However, the team leader said her "gut feeling" was that the examination was appropriately challenging. The team would not recommend any changes, 'as it would mean a watering down of the competency required at home language level'. It was felt that:

> Candidates writing Grade 12 English Home Language examinations should be able to manage questions which require a greater cognitive demand especially as many candidates will be required to use English as the language of instruction and assessment at a tertiary institution. The lack of language competency is a major contributing factor in the failure rate at tertiary institutions. If papers were to comply with the percentages demanded in the guideline documents, 40% of a paper is set at Level 1(literal comprehension) and level 2 (reorganization) cognitive demand, a candidate would be able to get the 50% on Home Language required for University entrance with very little in the way of Level 3 (inferential comprehension) or Level 4 (evaluation) skills. In fact they need get only 10% questions on a paper correct at a level of 3 or 4. In a language paper, this translates to a mere 7 marks. If standards are to be maintained these factors need to be taken into consideration.

Paper 2 had a preponderance of inferential comprehension questions. It was felt that the instrument could not be applied effectively to Paper 3, the writing paper.

Sepedi – Paper 1 was seen to have too many literal comprehension questions, too few inferential comprehension questions, and to vary in the number of evaluation and appreciation questions from year to year. However, by 2011, some improvement was noted:

Table 9: Sepedi Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	31%	48%	40%
Reorganization	17%		
Inferential comprehension	23%		40%
Evaluation	14%	28%	20%
Appreciation	14%		

In Paper 2, where there are choices, these were perceived to not always be at the same level of cognitive demand and degree of difficulty. Paper 3 was again judged as catering for

every learner; therefore, choice determined the cognitive challenge and degree of difficulty for individual candidates.

Sesotho – Paper 1 was perceived to have the full range of questions with a good number of inferential comprehension questions. However, there was some variation from year to year. The 2011 paper was seen to be fairly well balanced; however, there were insufficient inferential comprehension questions and too many evaluation questions.

Table 10: Sesotho Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	14%	43%	40%
Reorganization	29%		
Inferential comprehension	17%		40%
Evaluation	37%	40%	20%
Appreciation	3%		

Papers 2 and 3 were judged to be cognitively challenging. Overall, the examination was perceived to have a high level of cognitive demand, which was borne out to some degree by the examination results.

Setswana – Paper 1 was perceived to use the full range of question types. There appears to have been a gradual increase in the level of cognitive challenge over the four years. The 2011 paper had too few questions in the lower and medium level of the SAGs and too many in the higher level:

Table 11: Setswana Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	16%	35%	40%
Reorganization	19%		
Inferential comprehension	19%		40%
Evaluation	30%	47%	20%
Appreciation	17%		

Papers 2 and 3 were perceived to vary in terms of degree of difficulty and level of cognitive challenge depending on candidates' choices.

IsiNdebele – Paper 1 was judged to have too many literal comprehension and evaluation questions and insufficient inferential and appreciation questions. For example in 2011:

Table 12: IsiNdebele Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	47%	66%	40%
Reorganization	19%		
Inferential comprehension	3%		40%
Evaluation	31%	31%	20%
Appreciation	0%		

IsiXhosa – Paper 1 was deemed not to comply with the SAGs. It was perceived to be dominated by literal comprehension and reorganization questions, and there were insufficient inferential comprehension, evaluation and appreciation questions. For example in 2011:

Table 13: IsiXhosa Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	71%	91%	40%
Reorganization	20%		
Inferential comprehension	1%		40%
Evaluation	7%	7%	20%
Appreciation	0%		

There was inconsistency with the summary which affected the level of challenge: in 2008, 2010 and 2011 the option was given to write the summary in point form or a paragraph, but in 2009 only the former option was provided. The level of cognitive challenge appears to have decreased over the four years, with 2011 presenting the lowest level of challenge. The team judged questions on the HL papers to be at a lower level than the isiXhosa FAL papers. Paper 2 was also perceived to have a generally low level of cognitive demand.

IsiZulu – In Paper 1, literal comprehension questions were judged to dominate the paper with insufficient inferential comprehension and appreciation questions. However, this had improved somewhat in 2011 when compared with previous years:

Table 14: IsiZulu Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	39%	58%	40%
Reorganization	19%		
Inferential comprehension	17%		40%
Evaluation	20%	26%	20%
Appreciation	6%		

Paper 2 was perceived to offer more evaluation questions. In Paper 3, the questions were judged to be of a high order in terms of Barrett's Taxonomy but easy to answer.

Siswati – In Paper 1, the full range of question types was seen to be used. However, within the lower level specified in the SAGs there were perceived to be too few literal comprehension questions and too many reorganization questions. Reorganization questions dominated the paper: in 2008, they represented 53% of the questions; in 2009, 47% of questions; in 2010, 53% of questions; and in 2011, 30% of questions. The evaluators also perceived there to be some lack of consistency from year to year in the balance between the different levels of questioning. Nevertheless, the 2011 paper was judged to be close to the ideal as outlined in the SAGs:

Table 15: Siswati Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	13%	43%	40%
Reorganization	30%		
Inferential comprehension	41%		40%
Evaluation	16%	16%	20%
Appreciation	0%		

In Paper 2, the team found it difficult to make a judgement about the level of cognitive challenge because of choices involved. In Paper 3, however, it was perceived that the choices available to candidates were at the same level of cognitive demand and degree of difficulty.

Tshivenda – Paper 1 was perceived to use the full range of questions, which gradually became more cognitively challenging over the four years. However, in 2011 there were still seen to be too many literal comprehension and evaluation questions, and insufficient inferential comprehension questions.

Table 16: Tshivenda Paper 1:   2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	31%	51%	40%
Reorganization	20%		40%
Inferential comprehension	10%		40%
Evaluation	33%	39%	20%
Appreciation	6%		20%

In Paper 2 questions on poetry were perceived to be mainly easy, literal comprehension questions. Questions on the novel were seen to be more difficult but to have a low level of cognitive challenge. The drama questions were judged to be mainly easy inferential questions. On Paper 3, the questions were judged to have a high level of cognitive challenge but to vary in terms of difficulty.

Xitsonga – Paper 1 was perceived to cover the full range of question types. The 2011 paper seemed to be fairly well balanced, although there were rather too many literal comprehension questions and an inadequate number of inferential questions.

Table 17: Xitsonga Paper 1: 2011 – Compliance with level of cognitive challenge required by SAGs

	Proportion in 2011		Proportion recommended in SAGs
Literal comprehension	30%	51%	40%
Reorganization	21%		40%
Inferential comprehension	23%		40%
Evaluation	21%	25%	20%
Appreciation	4%		20%

Characteristically, Papers 2 and 3 covered a range of questions types. On Paper 3 there was tendency for the essay to have evaluation and appreciation questions and shorter information texts to have reorganization and inferential comprehension questions.

To conclude, apart from English and Siswati, there were generally perceived to be too many literal comprehension questions and an inadequate number of inferential comprehension questions on Paper 1. There seemed to be some inconsistency from year to year and across the languages with regard to evaluation and appreciation questions. Examiners seemed to have particular problems with setting appreciation questions. This may have been because of the nature of the texts in Paper 1: appreciation questions may lend themselves more easily to literary than to information texts. Reorganization questions appeared to be categorized somewhat differently by different evaluation teams. This resulted in part from the difficulty of using Barrett's Taxonomy to evaluate grammar questions (see Section 3.5 below), with some teams categorizing these as reorganization questions. The taxonomy was also difficult to apply to writing, which may have resulted in an over-estimation in the level of cognitive challenge of Paper 3.

These problems suggest that examiners – and possibly the evaluators, too – are still in the process of adapting to the requirements of the NSC HL examination with regard to the cognitive demand of questions. However, in the case of Sepedi, Setswana, isiZulu and Tshivenda there did seem to be some improvement over the four years, with better balanced papers and a gradual increase in the level of cognitive challenge.

The English evaluators expressed concern that the examination should have a high level of cognitive challenge to prepare students for the demands of tertiary study. As discussed in Section 1.3 above, English is the language mainly used as the LoLT in tertiary education and it is to be expected that this would influence the perceptions of English examiners and evaluators with regard to appropriate degree of difficulty and level of cognitive challenge of the examination. As will be seen in Section 3.4 below, African language evaluators were more concerned with preparing students to study these languages at tertiary level.

3.4 Content

In general, all the languages were deemed to comply with the SAGs with regard to their content. However, three concerns were expressed by the evaluators.

3.4.1 The treatment of grammar

Although the aim of the study was not to investigate specific grammatical elements of the examination papers, all the evaluation teams except the English team expressed concern about the treatment of grammar in Section C of Paper 1. It was felt that the grammar questions were limited in number, extremely easy and did not prepare students for studying languages at university. Another concern was that this would discourage teachers from teaching grammar, which was seen to be an essential component of language study. The isiXhosa team, for example, stated that:

> The content of the grammar is too easy meaning that candidates in future will go to the examination room without being bothered to study. This will discourage the educators who cover the variety of aspects in grammar not to teach it any more if it is assessed in the way it is done in these question papers.

This team went on to suggest that the grammar questions on the HL paper were easier than those on the FAL paper. There was a further concern about the way in which grammar questions had been shaped on an English model. They were described by the Sesotho Evaluation Team as being more like comprehension questions. It seems that for many languages, Section C had taken an unfamiliar and unexpected form in 2011.

As discussed in Section 1.5.1 above, Afrikaans and African languages have been shaped by structural linguistics, whereas English has been influenced by the British curriculum in which grammar is taught contextually using a wide range of texts, including media texts. The emphasis was on close reading of texts. It is not surprising that African languages and Afrikaans are finding it difficult to adapt to the approach in the NSC, which is based on an English model.

3.4.2 Biased and inappropriate texts

Mention was made by some teams of biased and inappropriate texts. For example, one evaluation teams referred to the use of religious texts which privileged Christians. Another

team mentioned an advertisement for Gallia cream, which they felt would disadvantage rural learners. The same team referred to a question on Section C of Paper 1 in which the examiners had tried to construct a question on the English model using a text that purported to be an advertisement but was not. Another team claimed that a question was 'unfair to the candidates since some of them especially those in rural areas do not have access to cell phones'. And yet another team maintained that an essay topic about pollution favoured students doing science.

Whilst it is important to avoid bias in texts, it is also necessary to examine what constitutes bias in examination questions. For example, one might question whether it is biased to include a text about cell phones, which are widely used throughout South Africa. The critical and developmental outcomes in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) envisage students who will become citizens in a modern democracy. It is important that texts provide students with opportunities to envisage such identities and do not trap them in narrow, parochial views of what it means to be a rural learner (Prinsloo 2002; 2004). It is important too for language educators to keep in mind that learners are acquiring a wealth of general knowledge about the world in their other subjects.

3.4.3 Translated texts

Mention was made by some evaluation teams of badly translated and inappropriately translated texts. For example, in the Paper 1 of the Tshivenda examination, repeated use was made of translations of Zapiro's cartoons. These cartoons, translated from English, were not considered appropriate for the intended audience.

The NSC HL examination includes visual and media texts such as cartoons. As explained in Section 1.5.1 above, the selection of such texts is relatively unfamiliar for teachers of African languages. Furthermore, as discussed in Section 1.3 above, the availability of such texts may be limited for minority languages such as Tshivenda and isiNdebele. The question of selection and translation of such texts merits serious attention. It may be appropriate to select and translate from other African languages, such as isiZulu, rather than English since these might be more culturally congruent. The possibility exists of generating new texts for teaching and assessment; however, in doing so one needs to guard against developing texts that lack authenticity.

3.5 Comparability of the 2008 – 2010 papers with those of 2011

In this section, the 2011 examination papers are compared with those of the previous three years. The evaluators reported that the papers had become more balanced by 2011. Technically, in terms of such aspects as layout and proof-reading, they have also improved as will be seen in Section 3.6 below. Some of the examinations, such as English, Sepedi and Sesotho, are perceived to have become more challenging in 2011. For others, it is difficult to generalize since one of the papers may have become more difficult and another easier. Comparisons are presented for each language below.

Afrikaans – There was perceived to be some improvement in Paper 1 in 2011; however, it was still not considered to be sufficiently cognitively challenging. Paper 2 was considered to be of a better standard in 2011than in previous years with more evenness in the demands of the questions. Paper 3 was judged similar over the four years with little in the way of difference in 2011.

English – Paper 1 for 2011 was judged to be a more difficult and cognitively a more challenging paper than in previous years. The language standard and general layout of this paper was seen to be commendable; visual texts were particularly clear. An improvement was noted in the balance of Paper 2 in 2010, which was sustained in 2011. It was a somewhat more challenging paper than in previous years. Paper 3 was perceived to be of a similar standard in 2011 to that of previous years.

Sepedi – Paper 1 was considered to be more difficult in 2011 than in 2009 or 2010. It was also a more challenging paper than in previous years with a better balance of questions at different levels of cognitive demand. With regard to the essay questions on Paper 2, from 2008 to 2010 they were all categorized as difficult evaluation questions. In 2011, this changed and some difficult reorganization questions were introduced. With regard to the contextual questions for poetry, there was a greater variation in the degree of difficulty of questions in 2011 than in 2010. In the case of the novel, in 2011 there was a good balance of questions. With regard to drama, the 2011 questions were judged to be similar to those of 2010 – moderate to easy. Paper 3 was judged to be consistently difficult over the four years.

Sesotho – In the case of Paper 1, the 2011 paper was set at a moderate degree of difficulty compared to 2008, which was easier, and 2009 to 2010, which were more difficult. The 2011 paper was judged to be the most balanced in terms of degree of difficulty and level of cognitive challenge. With regard to the essay questions on Paper 2, the poetry and novel questions were more difficult and more cognitively challenging than in 2009 to 2010. The drama questions were more difficult in 2010 and 2011 than in previous years. The contextual questions for poetry, novels and drama were judged to be consistently fairly difficult over the four year period. With regard to Paper 3, in 2011 essay questions were set at a high degree of difficulty and level of cognitive demand; this section of the paper was judged to be slightly more challenging than in previous years. Questions on Sections 2 and 3 were consistently difficult and challenging over the four years.

Setswana – Paper 1 was described as easy in 2011; it was more difficult than the 2010 paper in terms of cognitive challenge but easier than the 2008 to 2009 papers. With regard to Paper 2, the essay questions over the four year period were all categorized as difficult reorganization questions. The contextual poetry questions were judged more difficult in 2011 than in previous years. It is difficult to make a judgment about the novel and drama questions. Paper 3 Section A was reported to be slightly more difficult in 2011 than in previous years; Section B was on a par with previous years; and Section C was deemed slightly easier.

IsiNdebele – Paper 1 was considered more moderate in terms of degree of difficulty in 2010 and 2011 than in 2009. The level of cognitive challenge was fairly consistent over the four years. Paper 2 poetry questions in 2011 were perceived to more moderate than in previous years, which were considered difficult. The questions on the novels in 2011, however, were perceived to be easier than in previous years, which were considered to be moderate. The drama questions in 2011 were perceived to be more moderate than in 2009 and 2010, which were perceived to be difficult. Paper 3 in 2011 maintained the moderate degree of difficulty and challenge of 2010.

IsiXhosa - Paper 1 in 2011 was perceived to be easier with a lower level of cognitive challenge than in previous years. With regard to the essay questions on Paper 2 in 2011, the poetry questions were perceived to be somewhat more difficult than those in 2010. The drama questions were perceived to present a similar level of challenge to those set in 2009 – 2010. The questions on the novel were perceived to be more challenging than those in 2009 – 2010. Paper 3 was set at a similar level to that of 2010, although a few questions were more difficult and/or challenging than in 2010.

IsiZulu - Paper 1 was perceived to be easier in 2011 than in previous years. With regard to Paper 2, contextual poetry questions were seen to be more difficult in 2011 than in 2010, and the paper was perceived to be the easiest of the four years. Questions on the novel in 2010 – 2011 were perceived to be more challenging than those of 2008 – 2009, which were perceived to be easy. Questions on drama were judged to be consistently fairly easy; the 2011 questions were similar in terms of challenge to those of 2010. The essay questions on Paper 2 were perceived to be consistently challenging over the four years. Poetry essay topics were perceived to be more difficult in 2011 than in 2010. Paper 3 was consistent over the four years with Section A dominated by easy evaluation questions, and Sections B and C by easy inferential questions.

Siswati – Paper 1 was judged to be consistently easy over the four years. However, the 2011 paper was perceived to be easier than that of 2010. In terms of cognitive demand, the 2011 paper was seen to be more balanced than in previous years. With regard to Paper 2, the essay questions in 2011 were considered the most balanced in terms of choices and the most difficult of the four years under review. With regard to the contextual questions, the choices of poetry questions in 2011 were considered to be more difficult than in 2009 and 2010. For the first time, the same poem was used for both the essay question and the contextual questions. The balance of the questions on the novel improved in 2011. The drama questions, in contrast, were less well balanced in 2011 than in 2010. With regard to Paper 3, in 2011 there appeared to be some improvement in the balance of question choices in Sections A and B.

Tshivenda – With regard to Paper 1, the 2011 paper was perceived to be somewhat more difficult than those of the previous three years. With regard to Paper 2, the contextual poetry questions in 2011 were perceived to be slightly easier than those of 2010. It is difficult to draw a conclusion about the questions on the novel and drama. The 2010 and 2011 essay questions appeared to be slightly more challenging than those of previous years. With regard to Paper 3, questions were seen as consistently difficult and cognitively challenging.

Xitsonga – With regard to Paper 1, the 2011 paper was judged to be easier than those of previous years. Although the level of cognitive challenge was fairly well balanced in 2011, there were fewer inferential questions (23%) than previously. The essay questions on Paper 2 appeared to be more challenging in 2011 than those of previous years. The 2011 contextual poetry questions were felt to be on a similar level to those of 2009 and 2010. The questions on the novel were perceived to be consistently easy. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the questions on drama. With regard to Paper 3, the 2011 paper was marked by the fact that inferential comprehension dominated.

3.6 Format of examination papers

Although some problems were identified with the formatting of examination papers when the NSC was first introduced in 2008, there seems to have been a good deal of technical improvement since then and these papers were generally considered satisfactory. However, there was some concern about the length of the instructions in Paper 2.

The number of visual texts in the African language papers seems to have increased since 2008, which, as already discussed, has presented some challenges. Several of the African language teams mentioned that Section C (Language study) of Paper 1 had changed in 2011. There was concern about this since the new format downplayed the importance of grammar and included multiple choice questions. The questions were seen by some evaluators to be more like comprehension questions than grammar questions.

3.7 Standard and quality of the 2008 – 2011 final examination papers

Technically, the examinations seem to have improved since 2008. The English team remarked that in 2011 the papers were commendable, visual texts were especially clear, and language was appropriate and correct. The 2011, Afrikaans paper also seemed to be of a higher standard in this regard. The technical quality of African language papers seems to have improved since 2008. However, there were still occasional concerns about inconsistent awarding of marks, spelling mistakes, incorrect phrasing of questions, inaccurate answers in the memoranda, visual texts which are not always clear, the use of non-standard vocabulary, and poor translation of terminology.

There was some concern, on the one hand, with the selection of texts that were, for example, seen to be too easy, too short or too long and, on the other hand, with the translation of texts. However, these problems did not appear to be widespread.

The major concern is that, with the exception of English, the results suggest that the papers may be too easy, do not have sufficient level of cognitive challenge and do not always discriminate accurately between students who have achieved different levels of competence in their HL. A further concern is that some examinations appear to be getting easier. Examiners seem to be experiencing difficulty setting inferential comprehension, evaluation and appreciation questions consistently, and even amongst the evaluation teams there is disagreement about how questions should be categorized.

Suggestions were put forward by the evaluation teams to explain the low level of challenge in the examinations. The isiZulu team suggested that examiners are aware, firstly, that learners are not used to answering higher order questions and, secondly, that learners in urban townships outside of KwaZulu-Natal struggle with standard isiZulu. As the compilers want the learners to pass the examination, they tend to construct the questions accordingly. The Afrikaans team felt that the NSC examination for Afrikaans is closer to the old Standard Grade than to the old Higher Grade.

3.8 The instrument

The evaluators felt that although Barrett's Taxonomy is appropriate for assessing the cognitive challenge of Paper 2 and of Sections A and B of Paper 1, it cannot be applied effectively to Section C of Paper 1 or to Paper 3. It was suggested that Bloom's Taxonomy would work better for the latter.

On occasion, there was a lack of consistency among the teams in the way Barrett's Taxonomy was interpreted and applied. 'Reorganization', in particular, seemed to be applied inconsistently. One reason for this is that it was difficult to apply Barrett's Taxonomy to grammar questions and these were often categorized as 'reorganization' questions. The isiZulu team felt that the 'reorganization' category was more relevant for content subjects. Appreciation questions were rarely identified in Paper 1. The question arises as to whether questions requiring the ability to appreciate lend themselves more naturally to the literature paper; whether examiners simply failed to construct them; or alternatively whether evaluators failed to recognize them.

The adapted version of Barrett's Taxonomy takes account of both cognitive challenge and degree of difficulty. It makes for a very detailed analysis, from which it is not easy to draw

conclusions. The instrument may also be applied mechanically obviating the necessity for evaluators to use their professional judgment. With these problems in mind, team leaders were asked whether they needed an instrument or whether it would be better to rely on their professional judgment.[3] There was agreement that the instrument enabled evaluators to be more rigorous in finding evidence for their judgments. The English team leader responded that 'applying the instrument helps you to confirm your gut instincts'. The Tshivenda team leader found the instrument helpful and took the pragmatic view that 'you're never going to have a perfect instrument'.

It became evident from the analysis, that the cognitive demand and degree of difficulty of questions were not the only factors determining the degree of difficulty of the examinations.

Other factors mentioned by evaluators were:

- whether the summary is written in point form or as a paragraph
- the amount of scaffolding provided for questions; for example, in the isiZulu paper, headings were provided for one of the questions on Paper 3, 2011
- whether questions are multiple choice or open-ended and the amount of writing required to answer them. A multiple choice question is not necessarily easier; it depends on the skill of the examiner in constructing questions
- the types of texts used; these can vary in terms of content, register, diction, imagery and accessibility.

Finally, it was noted that although the English examination consistently had insufficient questions at Barrett's level 1 and 2, it was the only examination for which the results had a normal distribution curve, suggesting that it was set at an appropriate degree of difficulty. This was supported by the professional judgment of the English team leader, who said her '"gut feeling" was that it was at an appropriate level of challenge'. This suggests the need for a statistical item analysis of the examination papers to complement the qualitative evaluation carried out in this study. This would make possible a critical consideration of the cognitive levels set out in the SAGs (see Table 6 above).

3.9 Concerns raised about Paper 4

As can be seen from Table 4 above, Paper 4 of the NSC examination is a school based assessment (SBA) of candidates' oral proficiency, which contributes 50 out of the 300 marks for the entire examination. Although consideration of Paper 4 was not one of the goals of this study, Umalusi needs to have this aspect of the examinations investigated in the future in the same way as Papers 1 to 3, the external component of the NSC examinations. The results will reveal whether or not oral examinations are carried out in a consistent manner in the languages and throughout the years under study.

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[3] At a meeting at Umalusi on 12 January 2012.

4. Discussion and conclusion

4.1 The standards of the HL examinations administered to Grade 12 learners 2008-2011

From a technical perspective, the standards of the NSC HL examinations appear to have improved between 2008 and 2011. The qualitative evaluation reveals better balanced papers and, in some cases, more challenging ones. However, the level of cognitive challenge on Paper 1 is generally too low with a preponderance of lower order questions and too few inferential questions. There appears to considerable inconsistency from year to year and across the languages with regard to evaluation and appreciation questions.

The examination results indicate that, with the exception of English, the pass rates and the mean scores are too high. This suggests that for the most of the languages the examinations may not set a sufficiently high standard.

4.2 Consistency of the standards across the 11 official languages

The study reveals that the standards are not consistent throughout the 11 official languages. Both the qualitative evaluation and the examination results suggest that the standard set for English is higher than that for the other languages. The examination results also suggest that English discriminates between those candidates who would have passed on the old Standard Grade and those who would have excelled on the Higher Grade.

The probable reasons for the high standard and capacity for discrimination of the English examination have been explained in Sections 1.3 and 1.4.1 above. In summary, English is a global language and can be benchmarked against curricula in other English speaking countries. It is the language of record in South Africa and has access to a wealth of texts. Furthermore, pressure is exerted on English to maintain high standards, because it is the main language of tertiary education. Most importantly, the curriculum is premised on an international model, which privileges English. There is a community of practice in the teaching and assessment of English which has a good fit with the new NSC examination.

With regard to the nine indigenous languages, there was sometimes a mismatch in the qualitative evaluation between the perceived degree of difficulty of the examination papers and the actual degree of difficulty as revealed by the examination results. This suggests that different standards have been constructed in different communities of practice. As suggested in Section 3.3.1 above, there is a need to select key questions that have been identified as easy, moderate and difficult and submit them to statistical item analysis, which would reveal the actual degree of difficulty experienced by candidates in answering the questions. This would provide a starting point for the reconsideration of existing standards.

It is important to mention that there were some indigenous languages, such as Sesotho, where the match between the perceived degree of difficulty and the actual degree of difficulty of questions was much closer. These languages could perhaps be used to provide a benchmark for the development of new standards.

There are some minor aspects of the papers where inconsistency occurs, for example, not all the examinations have the same instructions with regard to the writing of summaries, and passages are sometimes too long or too short. This could fairly easily be remedied.

Finally, although an evaluation of Paper 4 was not part of this study, concerns were expressed about the dearth of information about the standards of the paper throughout the 11 languages. Given that the marks for this paper make up 25% of the final HL NSC examination mark, this merits further investigation.

4.3 Management of the transition from the SC to the NSC

The transition from the SC to the NSC seems to be proceeding fairly well. From a technical perspective, the examinations now comply with the SAGs. This study suggests that the next step is to work towards greater consistency of standards throughout the languages. This process cannot happen overnight since standards are internal to the different communities of practice, and change must take place from within the practice. A statistical item analysis as discussed in Section 4.2 above would provide a useful starting point for this process.

Of particular concern is the need for all the examinations to discriminate between candidates performing at different levels of achievement. Here an important starting point is for examiners, moderators and evaluators to have both a common understanding of the purpose of the examination, and a common understanding of the different categories of questions in Barrett's Taxonomy. A statistical item analysis would be useful in revealing which questions discriminate between candidates at different levels of achievement. The results could be used to set up an item bank illustrating questions at different degrees of difficulty and levels of cognitive challenge. This could be a useful resource for examiners, moderators and evaluators.

However, consideration also needs to be given to the extent of standardization required. Given the different positions which the languages occupy (see Section 1.3 above), the different uses to which they are put and their different structural characteristics[4], is it appropriate to treat them in the same way in all respects for the purposes of the examination? And if this is the case, whose standards should prevail? For example, consideration needs to be given to the way in which grammar is examined (see Section 3.4.1 above); currently the way in which grammar is assessed in Paper 1 may not reflect the manner in which it is taught in Afrikaans and African languages either at school or university. Similarly, is it appropriate to include such aspects as political cartoons in a Tshivenda examination, when such texts do not exist in the world outside the classroom? Are there more appropriate texts that could be used?

4.4 The effectiveness of the evaluation instrument

As discussed in Section 3.4.3 above, Barrett's Taxonomy is appropriate for assessing the cognitive challenge of Paper 2 and of Sections A and B of Paper 1, but it cannot be applied effectively to Section C of Paper 1 or to Paper 3. A similar observation was made in the 2011 Home Language report, *The challenge of cognitive demand* (Umalusi 2011). The report concluded that any cognitive demand taxonomy devised to evaluate the HL examination papers needed to cover all aspects of the papers. A key recommendation of the report,

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[4] Afrikaans and English are both Germanic languages whereas the nine indigenous languages are all Bantu languages (Mesthrie 2002).

therefore, was that the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy and Barrett's Taxonomy should be combined to complement the weaknesses and strengths of each other, and a synthesis of the two taxonomies has been constructed.

The present study also suggests that evaluators do not always interpret the categories of Barrett's Taxonomy in the same way. Suggestions have been made in Section 4.3 above as to how this situation might be improved. However, despite these concerns the evaluators were unanimous about the value of instrument in making their judgments more objective.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

5.1 Statistical item analysis and question bank

Statistical item analysis of the examinations should be carried out to complement the qualitative evaluation. Given that there are eleven examinations, this will need to be carefully focused. The information obtained could be used, firstly, to assist examiners, moderators and evaluators in assessing the accuracy of their judgments with regard to the degree of difficulty and level of cognitive challenge of questions. Secondly, the results of the analysis could be used to set up a bank of questions illustrating the different degrees of difficulty and levels of cognitive challenge. Thirdly, the results of the item analysis could be used to refine the new evaluation instrument which combines Revised Bloom's Taxonomy and Barrett's Taxonomy (Umalusi 2012).

5.2 Evaluation of Paper 4

Further research should be carried out into the standards of assessment in Paper 4.

5.3 Meetings between examiners, moderators and evaluators

There should be annual meetings of examiners, moderators and evaluators at which feedback is provided on the outcomes of the examination. These meetings should be documented in order to systematically improve the quality of the NSC HL examinations.

5.4 Handbook

A clear, well laid out handbook should be developed for examiners, moderators and evaluators explaining such things as the purpose of the examination and why it is important for examination results to have a normal distribution curve. The handbook should include examples of questions at different degrees of difficulty and levels of cognitive demand in all eleven languages.

5.5 Revision of the evaluation instrument

Barrett's Taxonomy cannot be applied effectively to all papers, and sections of papers, in the examination. The decision already taken to revise the instrument is therefore supported.

5.6 Development of texts in African languages

Appropriate texts should be developed in the African languages, where deemed necessary. For example, texts are needed to support the teaching and assessment of visual, media and critical literacy. Those developing the texts should strive towards authenticity in terms of the language in question.

5.7 Further research

Research has been carried out in South Africa using the PIRLS data (Janks 2011) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) data (Van der Berg 2008; Spaull, 2011), but very little research has been done on language assessment in the public examination system. It is recommended, therefore, that research programmes be set up to work in this important field. These programmes could be located at Umalusi and/or at the Schools of Education within the universities. The results of this research could make a significant contribution to the improvement of the NSC HL examinations.

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7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Adapted version of Barrett's Taxonomy

Barrett's Taxonomy (based on interpretation and appreciation of text)	Degree of difficulty	Explanation and examples per degree of difficulty	Example questions
Literal Comprehension (LC) **To identify information directly stated** Recognition and recall of: 1. Ideas and information explicitly stated 2. Details, main ideas 3. Provide from memory explicitly stated reasons for actions 4. Sequence 5. Recognition of comparison 6. Cause and effect relationships 7. Character traits	**Easy**	Identify main ideas Simple recall answers; identify specific data; tell; recite; list e.g. identify parts of speech; Read and locate, briefly define a term, name – e.g. identify answers to wh- (equivalent) questions from a text.	List the names of the characters involved… Skim read to identify… Tell the story… Define a term… What, where, when, who questions…. What is the name of for instance a person, thing, place etc.; What happened at a particular place…
	Moderate	Recall more complex content as a series of facts; simple relationships; simple explanations; identifying main ideas (and supporting ones) in paragraphs; identify cause, result, reason directly from a text.	What happened to shorten his stay… To find what a character did… Who for instance lived on the farm? When did something happen?
	Difficult	Give examples, explain, briefly summarise, translate, interpretation of realistic visuals. Look at an illustration and tell the story in sequence; Summarise a text; identify principles which apply in a novel context; explaining; more complex reasoning with regard to understanding and explanation. Explain single cause and effect principles (What was the reaction of… to…). Identify and explain particular character traits.	Which words in the intro…? or Mention the word… How much land was claimed… How did they find …; How did they accomplish… Over what kind of land did they travel… (recall with *no* sequencing or reorganization) Identify the order of incidents… (general sequencing) Identify explicit statements… Identify likenesses / differences in characters… Look for ideas which conflict each other…

Barrett's Taxonomy (based on interpretation and appreciation of text)	Degree of difficulty	Explanation and examples per degree of difficulty	Example questions
Reorganization (R) **To organize or order the information in a different way than it was presented** 1. Classifying 2. Outlining 3. Summarising 4. Construct ideas 5. Utilise ideas from the text 6. Paraphrase or translate the author's statements	**Easy**	Write texts related to familiar contexts. Candidates know what process is required to solve the problem from the way the problem is posed.	Classify ideas… Organize information… reorganize some facts… Classify the following according to… Placing people, things, events in categories…
	Moderate	Candidate to organize information into a presentable poster or a table to promote ready comprehension.	Place the following under the proper heading… Give a summary of… / outline main ideas Order ideas / information under a particular heading…\
	Difficult	Draw for instance information from given text; illustrate in words, construct ideas; e.g. Propose a course of action based on a straightforward case study. Consolidate ideas from more than one source; discuss poetic devices such as repetition, symbolism.	Divide the story according to particular parts… To relate ideas to a theme… Tell the story in your own words… Describe the tone, using your own words … (construct ideas) Multiple-choice questions… / Which of the following does not belong…? What are the similarities / differences between two or more characters, stories or poems …? Group the common characteristics / factors / elements in table form or Venn-diagram … Combine the information from different sources in a paragraph … Do a mind map to illustrate understanding; view; perspective… table form or Venn-diagram … Combine the information from different sources in a paragraph … Do a mind map to illustrate understanding; view; perspective…

Barrett's Taxonomy (based on interpretation and appreciation of text)	Degree of difficulty	Explanation and examples per degree of difficulty	Example questions
Inferential Comprehension (IC) *To respond to information in a different way than it is presented* 1. *Answers not explicitly stated – must be inferred* 2. *Inferring supporting details* 3. *Using intuition/ personal experiences* 4. *Thinking and evaluation that go beyond the printed page* 5. *Organize main ideas in a suitable form* 6. *Counter-intuitive relationships, collect information from available texts to support a particular position/opinion and re-present the position* 7. *Interpreting figurative speech*	**Easy**	Collect information from available texts to support a particular position/opinion and re-present the position in own text; e.g. undertake guided research to collect information necessary to a task; organize information into suitable form (report, memo, visual presentation)	Explain what is meant by… (answer not found in text) Explain / illustrate in own words… Answer a riddle… Write a sentence that summarise the main idea… Was the discovery planned or accidental… Construct ideas based on what you've read … Provide reasons for your understanding of…
	Moderate	Investigate in more detail, establish what the present is revealing of the future, solve by reading between the lines, relate, distinguish between, e.g. write a persuasive essay; take minutes of a straightforward meeting; deal with case studies and propose course of action, e.g. in report form, explain what a character feels when expressing particular feelings. Discuss impact of e.g.	Predict what would happen/ will be the result… Compare the characters/ stories based on interpretation of features/ character traits… Make inferences from the character's reaction / response … What is the main idea in the paragraph… the main theme in the story / poem… Explain the metaphor… What would possibly be the result/ effect of …? What do you think will happen hereafter…?
	Difficult	Complex abstract representation; referring to combination of concepts; Interpreting, report on, sort, debate, e.g. through preparing a speech and/or presentation. Using higher level cognitive skills and reasoning, e.g. in developing a proposal to solve a problem. Being able to break down a problem into its constituent parts – identifying what is required to be solved and then using appropriate methods in solving the problem. Find phrases to convey messages/ impressions/ implications. Discuss repercussion; provide substantiation.	Identify and explain what is implied… Identify the general significance, theme or moral not explicitly stated… React on implied information… Point to the suggested/ possibly preferred reaction of a character… Suggest consequences for the reaction of a character… What connotation can be made… and to substantiate such connotation from the text/ source material…? What connotation can be made… and to substantiate such connotation from the text / source material… Multiple-choice questions where educated guesses are required …

Barrett's Taxonomy (based on interpretation and appreciation of text)	Degree of difficulty	Explanation and examples per degree of difficulty	Example questions
			Indicate whether the story from another era and the circumstances in the story / novel may occur in present day terms …
			Journal writing for a particular character…
			Work with information which is suggested, insinuated, and to make inferences from the given text / source material…
			What would be the implications of…?
			To identify what the repercussions would be…
			Read and interpret an allegation…
			Interpret what is hinted at…
			What ideas are brought to mind…/ What makes ___ a ___?
			What caused the author to include particular words, ideas, characterisations…?
			What did_____ prove about his / her attitude toward____
			What was ____'s attitude about____?
			Interpret the following figurative expressions…

Barrett's Taxonomy (based on interpretation and appreciation of text)	Degree of difficulty	Explanation and examples per degree of difficulty	Example questions
Evaluation (E) **To make judgments in light of the material** 1. Sorting fact from opinion, same/ different and good or bad. e.g. To read a story and decide which character is the most like their own personality. Evaluation and awareness questions to be answered: Why do you think so? How did you know? 2. Judgment and focuses on qualities of accuracy and probability; appropriateness 3. Comments based on judgments of moral character	**Easy**	Opinion; giving general critique on a fairly straightforward topic; general comments on style; evaluate effectiveness of image.	Give an opinion whether what happened with the character may happen with a person in real life… Indicate whether … is a fact or opinion. Provide reasons for the answer…
	Moderate	Evaluate in more detail; compare and substantiate choice; evaluate the use of poetic devices; evaluate effectiveness of image.	Do you think the character's dialogue is realistic? Is the speaker's argument and/or logic? Critically evaluate the attitude / action of the character… Do you agree/ disagree with the view/ perspective / interpretation… Why?
	Difficult	Weigh possibilities and provide reasons; make recommendations; to provide adequate support for conclusions; comments on appropriate or effective use of e.g. metaphors; evaluative explanation of e.g. contradictions; comments on the accuracy of statements.	Do you think it's good for a character to pretend … give reasons for your answer… What does the attitude/ reaction of… suggest about the character's view of other people… Discuss a poem as example of e.g. a sonnet Defend why a particular short story can serve as an example of a successful short story…. Propose ideas/ make suggestions based on an evaluation… Could this really happen … Is this fact or fiction? Give reasons for your answer… What strange ideas_____ have? Which ideas are still accepted and which are no longer believed? Evaluate the appropriateness of text… / appropriateness of figurative speech Is a character acting fairly… on what grounds would one make the claim?

Barrett's Taxonomy (based on interpretation and appreciation of text)	Degree of difficulty	Explanation and examples per degree of difficulty	Example questions
Appreciation (A) **To give an emotional or image-based response** 1. Emotional response to the content 2. Identification with characters or incidents 3. Reactions to the authors' use of language 4. Imagery 5. Response based on own opinion 6. Critical review based on interpretation and appreciation	**Easy**	General emotional response with little substantiation; identification with characters or incidents; general reactions.	Do you like the main character… Substantiate your view… What part of the story did you find most exciting – provide reasons…
	Moderate	Substantiate an opinion Critique statements about situations made by others. Involving synthesis, critical argument; novel or abstract contexts; create poetry/a narrative.	Do you think that he will follow the advice, keeping his personality in mind… What would you do if you were _____? Illustrate response in words… Give commentary on a character's values and ethical choices… Motivate your answer
	Difficult	Critical review based on the ability to interpret, illustrate in words and provide an appreciative opinion. Generalise patterns observed in situations; working with complex problems involving insight and logic-leaps; creating new solutions to problems; redesign. Writing a complex review / critique Re-write information / a story for a new context and setting.	Respond on e.g. a dilemma or conflict in a story / poem … On what grounds can you identify with the character…/ Be able to defend the actions of a character…? Write a conclusion for … Commentary on the appropriateness of figure of speech; language use… Discuss the appropriateness of an introduction, close, style of writing etc. Rewrite a part in a novel/ a drama as e.g. a poem… Give a substantiated opinion… Propose new solutions… Rewrite information / use information in a new applied setting… Writing appreciative comments based on observation … Critical reviewing processes… Write a poem/ short story on a particular topic…

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