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LACK OF EXCHANGE VALUE IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES FOR THE MARKETING OF TECHNICAL COLLEGES IN
SOUTH AFRICA

LACK OF EXCHANGE VALUE IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES FOR THE MARKETING OF TECHNICAL COLLEGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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sandiso@mut.ac.za**Abstract**

Technical, vocational, education and training (TVET) colleges in South Africa struggle to attract and retain adequate prospective students in a competitive environment of the post-schooling sector where they are often the last option. The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions on the role of language as a communication tool to market TVET colleges brand that seeks to promote entrepreneurial skills that could serve address socio-economic issues in the country. A questionnaire was used to survey 40 purposefully selected first-year students from two colleges. It was found that 96% of participants preferred to maintain the status quo in which English should be used as a language of marketing because of its perceived exchange value compared to African languages. There is a need for educational leaders to operate as change agents by bringing an awareness through practice on the value of African languages in society and the economy.

Keywords: African languages, communication, linguistic capital, marketing, transformation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a communication tool that can be used as part of the effective marketing strategy to engage the target audience. As such, the selected language would need to be aligned to the target audience's linguistic background and preferences. However, in a multilingual context it can be a challenge to find a balance between choosing one common language and making it understandable to all. More so if the language that has gained a lingua franca status is an ex-colonial language, English, that can be a challenge to many citizens that should benefit from the marketed product.

In the context of this study, South Africa has twelve official languages that include sign language. Among these, nine are African languages spoken by most African citizens located in different regions or provinces of the country (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996; Parliament, 2023). This transformative language approach was undertaken after many years of colonial and apartheid rule in which English and Afrikaans were the only official languages. However, in practice English still tends to be the official language of communication adopted by formal and some informal businesses in South Africa because of its global status and as means of dealing with linguistic diversity (Masala, 2023).

The province of interest in this study is KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) where, according to the KZN Provincial Language Policy (2009) IsiZulu and English are the two main languages of business and publication whilst isiXhosa and Afrikaans are also accorded official status. Similarly, educational institutions indicate English and IsiZulu as the official languages in their new language policies for use on business and teaching and learning matters. Yet, in practice English remain the dominant language of use making it a threat to African languages vitality (Kamwangamalu, 2000; Munyai & Phooko, 2021; Posel, Hunter & Rudwick, 2022; Seethal, 2023). This suggests that while African languages have been accorded equal and official status, they neither have the exchange value nor the linguistic value associated with English in different organisations and educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1991; Manan et al., 2023). However, studies on the informal use of African languages in education, business, homes and streets of South Africa shows a high interest and huge benefits (Charamba, 2020; Makalela, 2022; Masala, 2023; Ngcobo, 2014). IsiZulu is one of those dominantly used African languages in homes and streets across the country (25%) (Khanyile & Ballard, 2022; Statista Research Department, 2023) and by businesses and government in the print and visual media (Aiseng, 2022; Buthelezi, 2016; Ngcobo, 2014).

Against this diverse linguistic background and transformative language policies, it becomes curious as to how technical, vocational, education and training (TVET) Colleges use language as a marketing tool to increase and maintain their enrolment figures. The language of marketing TVET Colleges is of interest because they were created to assist particularly African school leavers with low pass marks so they can gain technical and entrepreneurial skills that would assist them break out of poverty in a country with very high unemployment rates (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018). The target student population of TVET Colleges are mainly from historically disadvantaged communities who were previously denied study opportunities (Bisschoff & Nkoe, 2005). Their school pass rate may suggest that they are not fluent in English which is their second language. Skakane-Masango et al. (2023) acknowledge that there are many factors associated with attrition among African students, yet the continued sole use of English as a medium of teaching and learning is a common contributory factor across the higher education sector. This suggests

a failure on the part of some higher education institutions to implement multilingual educational policies that are aimed at decolonizing the sector and increasing academic success (Ngcobo et al., 2021).

Most available research on the use of communication to raise awareness of a brand is in the business sector and very few studies have been conducted in education. This gap is mainly due to public educational institutions being viewed as focused on community services rather than profits. Hence, the study sought to explore students' perceptions on the use of language in the marketing campaigns of the two selected TVET Colleges in KZN to determine if it contributes effectively to the promotion of the brand and attracting prospective students. Perceptions are important to explore because of their role in influencing consumers to purchase or choose a particular brand, such as education, and remaining loyal to it (Abioro & Odunlami, 2021; Etzel, et al. 2001). Therefore, identifying communication gaps in the marketing of TVET Colleges could serve to eliminate them and come up with effective solutions to their low student intake and retention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

TVET Colleges in South Africa, and elsewhere, operate as businesses whose survival is dependent on them attracting and maintaining the right customers. Educational institutions can be classified as a marketable service in the same way as any other service (Russell, 2005). Despite the government investing a lot of money towards realizing the goals of the TVET sector they have been unable to make themselves a post school educational institution of first choice for many South Africans (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018). To secure their continued existence, TVET institutions need to adopt effective marketing strategies that will inform potential students on services offered by communicating their brand in a positive light (Beneke, 2011; Untarini et al. 2022; Zulu, 2017).

Effective communication means sharing accurate information that is in congruent with the organization's stakeholders (Ngcobo & Roya, 2023). TVET Colleges, despite being governed by the Continuing Education Act, find themselves competing with higher education institutions as providers of post school technical qualifications and entrepreneurial skills to help resolve socio-economic challenges associated with high unemployment in the country (Sebola, 2022). The 2023 second quarter survey puts the unemployment rate at a concerning 32,6% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). More concerning is the 'time bomb' posed by the high number of the unemployed youth who are at 61% and 71% when counting those that have given up seeking jobs, some of whom are graduates (Africa News, 2023). In the context where there are limited prospects of employment, TVET Colleges still struggle to meet the targets of 75% graduation rates as set by the National Development Plan for 2030. Many of the colleges only manage

about 9,2% graduation rate in a cycle of three years (Khuluvhe & Mathibe, 2021). Students either drop out or take longer in their studies which leads to costly classes with a small number of students (Khuluvhe & Mathibe, 2021). This denies students the entrepreneurial skills they could use to create their own jobs. Zulu and Mutereko' (2020) study on causes of high attrition rates across TVET Colleges finds that the reasons are multidimensional as they include students' concerns with programmes offered and poor induction programmes. In addition, the sole use of English causes African lecturers and their students to struggle to make sense of the content which leads to students' failure (Ndawo, 2019; Ngcobo et al. 2021). All these factors may suggest that students register at TVET Colleges without a clear understanding of what their study programmes entail. To meet their obligation to the students, it therefore becomes critical for TVET Colleges to clearly articulate their brand and what it offers.

TVET Colleges need to market their brand using the most suitable marketing communication strategies for their target audience (Krizanova et al. 2019; Untarini et al. 2022). This task is the responsibility of brand managers as they have to ascertain organizational profitability over an extended period (Baisya (2013: 23). One of the effective communication strategies is the choice of language(s) that would appeal to the target audience (Zulu, 2017). The language would enable the organization to appeal to their audiences' desires and actions and be understood as intended when it communicates its brand (Taillard, 2012:146). The language of choice for marketing purposes by businesses exposes "their disposition about the value of languages in the linguistic market" (Wang & Hatoss, 2023: 160). The choice of a language of communication, particularly in a multilingual context is not without its controversies. Bourdieu's (1986, 1991, 2000) theoretical framework on forms of capital outlines that language is a form of wealth or capital that has power to influence individuals and groups' choices in society. Another closely linked concept is that of politics of language which highlights the choice of language as a valuable resource that provides access and enables one to exercise power (Heller, 1995). For instance, English is generally viewed as a resource and a language of power because it seen as an international language of communication that dominates the markets in areas of education, economy, research, and politics. However, Abrar-ul-Hassan (2021) asserts that this notion of English as a global lingua franca with hegemony has not gone unchallenged in the multilingual global village, such as in universities, as more other languages are being employed as means of strategic communication in society.

The recognition of multilingualism by the Republic of South African (RSA, 1996: Act 108) Constitution which gives equal status to nine African languages with English has influenced the use of different language in society. This has seen businesses resorting to the use of African languages by themselves and mixing them with English in the marketing of their products to appeal to many African citizens in the

country (Aiseng, 2022; Buthelezi, 2016; Ngcobo, 2014). However, the perception of English as a resource to be acquired for socio-economic development, obtaining white-collar jobs and material success has led to it maintaining its linguistic capital (Yu & Xu, 2023). This ideology has contributed to English being uncritically desired as a language of education among some ex-colonial countries' citizens (Sah & Li, 2018). Lack of transformative action and the political will to implement language policies designed to decolonize Africa has enabled English to continue to dominate over African languages in all domains of prestige for Africans (Makalela, 2022). China is one of the exceptions that Africa can learn from as it has instead spread its language exchange value inside and outside China. The language ideology of many citizens is that Chinese, similarly to English, is a language resource with exchangeable value for better jobs and success in life (Ruiz, 1984; Sah & Li, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was quantitative and descriptive in its approach. Hence, data were collected through questionnaires which were administered among respondents purposefully selected from two TVET Colleges located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The respondents were a group of 40 first-year students in which 20 were from each of the two colleges.

The utilized survey questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A inquired on the respondents' preferred languages. Section B was on the language(s) used by the college in marketing its brand to determine if there was a match between the languages preferred by the respondents and those used by brand managers at the selected colleges. The questionnaire used closed questions in which the respondents had to select their answer from the options provided. The rating of the provided options was kept at three simple and direct levels. These ratings were either: agree, disagree or neutral. The tool was first piloted with 3 students prior to its use on the sample of 40 respondents.

Data collected from the questionnaire responses were captured and analyzed with the aid of the statistical software package called SPSS version 23.0. The results are presented graphically using descriptive statistics.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In keeping with the two sections of the research tool, the findings are presented in two separate sections.

4.1 Preferred languages of communication

The first question was on the respondents first language. This was meant to later match their language with that utilised by TVET brand managers to market their product. At the same time, the language

preferences would have been expected to inform brand managers on what language to use. Considering that the target audience would be the majority of disadvantaged African citizens, one would expect either the use of dominant local African languages or the simplified form of English.

Figure 1 indicates the first language of the respondents in which it was not surprising to find that an overwhelming majority of respondents (77.5%) were isiZulu language speakers. This was expected to be the case due to the linguistic context of the study which is KZN where isiZulu dominates. In keeping with other languages of the province, isiXhosa speaking students came second at 12.5%. They were followed by English first language speakers at 7.5%. The least number (2.5%) of respondents identified Afrikaans as their first language. The linguistic diversity in these two colleges is attributable to their central location that is accessible to various racially groups. Otherwise, educational institutions located in areas dominated by Africans struggle to attract citizens from diverse linguistic backgrounds in South Africa. This is due to previous apartheid policies that created tensions and suspicions among citizens of different races.

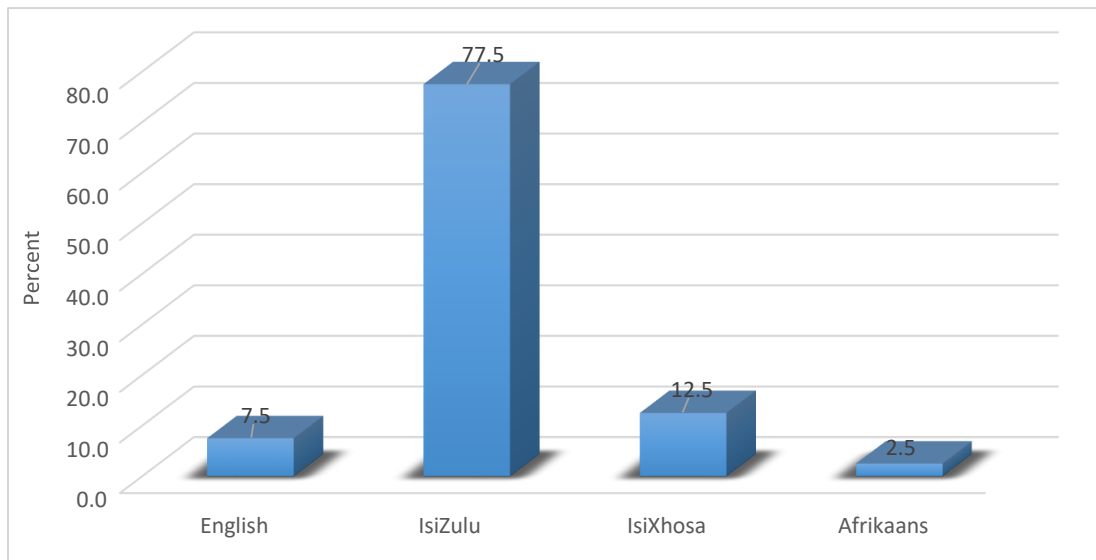


FIGURE 1. FIRST LANGUAGE OF RESPONDENTS
Source: Zulu, 2017

As a follow-up to the initial question on first language, the second question sought to determine the preferred language of written communication by respondents. The responses are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 displays that the preferred language of written communication by 95% (n=38) of respondents is English. Only two respondents differed in that one preferred IsiZulu whilst the other one preferred IsiXhosa. The selected languages were first languages of the two respondents. The rest of the African students preferred English even though they might not be very proficient in this language if one considers

that it is their second language. The fact that they are registered at a TVET College is an indication of this factor because it means their school leaving results were low. Yet, the preference for English should be understood in the context where English is considered a lingua franca in the country despite it being the first language of minorities. The prestige associated with English is due to it being perceived as a language of power and socio-economic success. This has enabled English to be viewed as an effective language of communication that has the desired linguistic capital and exchange value. To reach their target audience the majority of whom that are linguistically disadvantaged, the use of English would need to be simplified.

TABLE 1. LANGUAGE PREFERENCE

	Frequency	Percent
English	38	95.0
IsiZulu	1	2.5
IsiXhosa	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Zulu, 2017

The third question sought to understand the reasons for language choice among the respondents. The respondents were provided with possible options since the research tool was made up of closed questions for ease of responding. However, the respondents were not limited to one option because of the possibility of various reasons. Hence, Figure 2 shows different reasons and the respondents' levels of agreement or disagreement with the provided statements.

In contrast to Figure 1 which displays that only 7.5% of the respondents identified English as their first language, Figure 2 shows that the high preference for English (95.0%) is due to it being the first language of communication preferred by 54.55% of the respondents. Additional statements for the preference for English received even higher scores of agreements, according to Figure 2. These were as follows:

- I am more comfortable using it than any other language (88.46%).
- I am used to it compared to any other language (90%).
- It is easier to understand compared to other languages (95.24%).
- I have been exposed to it on most official documents and communiques (80.95%).

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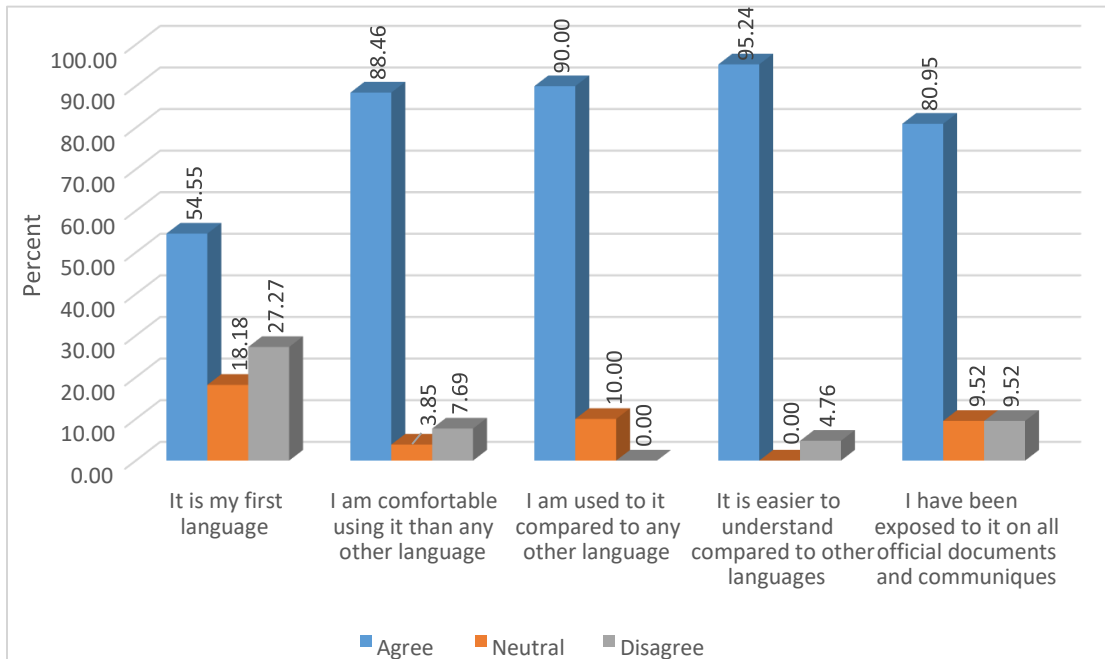


FIGURE 2. REASONS FOR LANGUAGE PREFERENCE

Source: Zulu, 2017

There is a notable high support for English among the respondents who indicate their preference for it for their written communication and indicate that they are used to it because it is easier to understand than their African languages. This was unexpected against the background in which TVET College students would have received low marks in their school leaving results and they are likely to perform poorly in their studies (Khuluvhe & Mathibe, 2021). One of the reasons behind TVET College students' poor performance at school and at college has been identified as the sole use of English as medium of instruction (Ndawo, 2019; Ngcobo et al. 2021). The cause of this unexpected attitude can be attributed to the politics of language which leads to the perception of English as a language of socio-economic advancement and makes African languages to lack the exchange value and linguistic capital (Sah & Li, 2018; Yu & Xu, 2023).

4.2 Language as a marketing strategy

The next set of questions was on the language used by the college brand managers to effectively communicate the college as a marketing strategy to attract prospective students.

The first question in this sub-section required the respondents to indicate the marketing communication channels in which they either heard or read about their college. Six possible channels were listed, and

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the seventh option was 'other'. More than one response was indicated as acceptable. The responses are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows that the print media in the form of newspapers (40%) and pamphlets (22.5%) were mostly the dominant sources of marketing noted by the respondents. It is indeed common for colleges and universities to market themselves in the print media, especially newspapers in the country. This is mainly influenced by the fact that school leaving results appear in newspapers across the country when they are released by the Department of Basic Education. The newspapers used to print the school leaving results would be in different languages. Further education institutions would then use print media at this time of the year to market their organisations as pamphlet inserts or advertisements in newspapers. In addition, educational institutions would secure a marketing space on radio. Hence, it is not surprising that pamphlets and radio received an equal percentage of 22.50%. The digital media in the form of the internet was indicated by 17.50% of respondents as the marketing channel in which they learnt about the college.

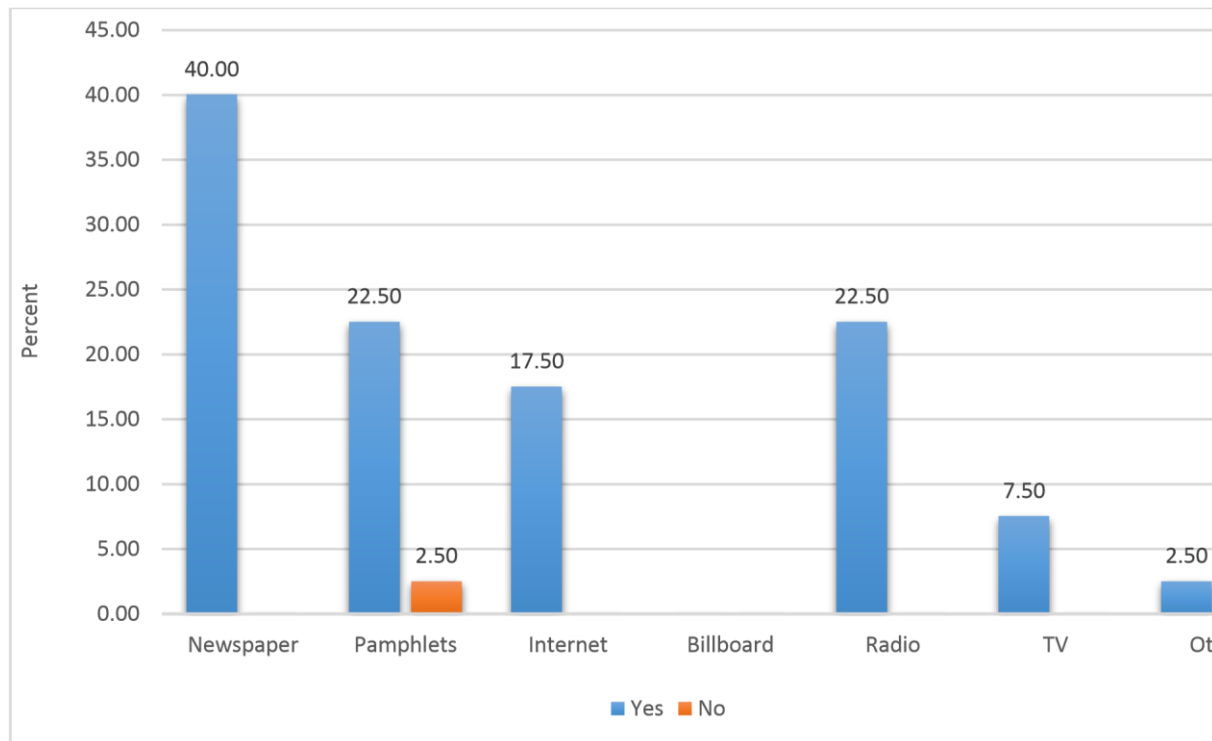


FIGURE 3. MARKETING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS
 Source: Zulu, 2017

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The next question sought to determine if the respondents found the language used in the marketing channel easy to understand. Figure 4 presents a diagram that shows an overwhelming agreement of 90% among the respondents about their understanding of the language used.

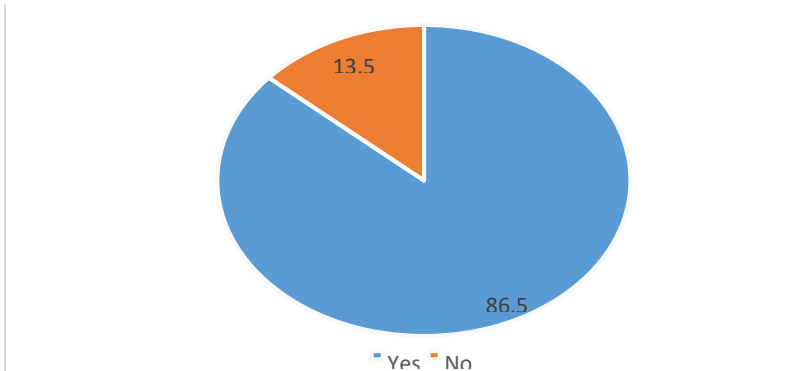


FIGURE 4. MARKETING LANGUAGE UNDERSTANDING
Source: Zulu, 2017

Furthermore, the respondents were required to choose from the listed points as to which of them were the reasons they were able to understand the language used in the advertisement. Figure 5 displays the results.

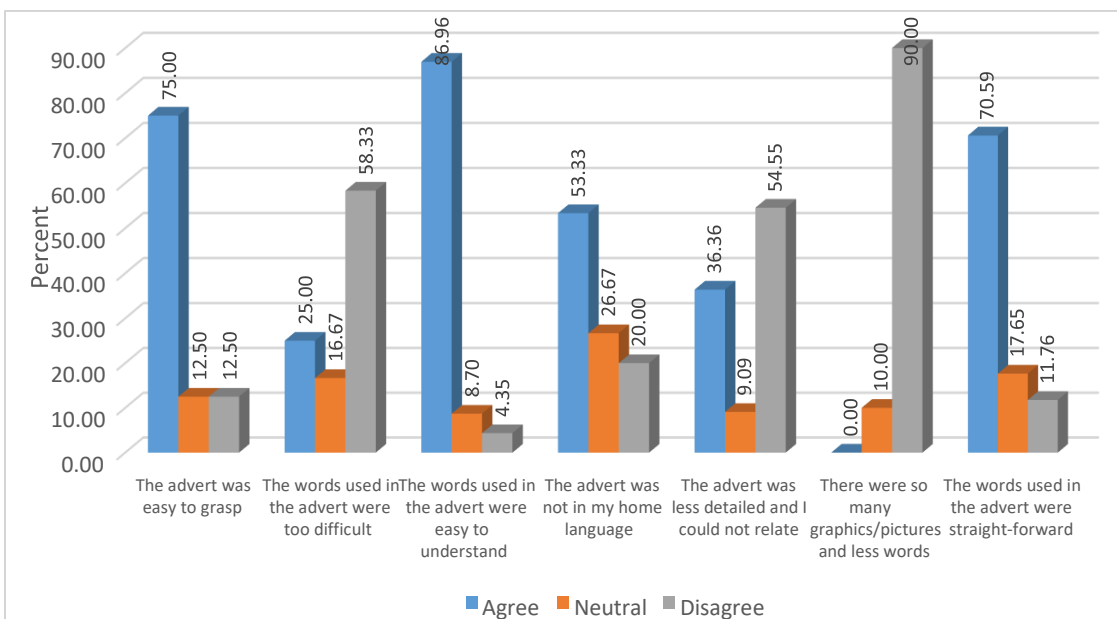


FIGURE 5. REASONS FOR LANGUAGE UNDERSTANDING
Source: Zulu, 2017

Figure 5 shows the respondents agreed that the reasons that contributed to the advertisement being easy to grasp (75%) was that the words used in the advertisement were easy or simple (86.96%) and straightforward (70.59%). In the context of education that continues to be transmitted through English, it would therefore be useful to simplify the language and hopefully contribute access that is matched with success.

The next question asked the respondents to be specific on which language should be used by the college to market their brand. The respondents were provided with two languages to choose from, and these were English and IsiZulu. The limit to the two was due to them being the languages of communication and business as listed in the KZN Provincial Language Policy (2009). Table 2 shows that English was the most preferred language by 97.5% (n=39) of the respondents. The results on Table 2 correlate with those on Table 1 in which 95% of the respondents indicated that they prefer English as a language of written communication.

TABLE 2. PREFERRED LANGUAGE FOR ADVERTISING

	Frequency	Percent
English	39	97.5
IsiZulu	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Zulu, 2017

It was again important for the respondents to provide reasons for their strong preference for English over IsiZulu which is their first language. Four possible reasons were provided to the respondents for them to indicate their agreement, disagreement or neutral position. Table 3 shows that there was a generally high agreement with the provided reasons.

As many as 45.5% of respondents viewed English as their first language when their first languages were African. This view is indicated as influenced by the fact that they (89.47%) understand English better and are comfortable using it for academic related purposes (89.47%). The one reason all the respondents agreed on 100% was that English is used as a medium of communication.

TABLE 3. REASONS FOR MARKETING LANGUAGE PREFERENCE

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Because it is my home language.	45.45	18.18	36.36
I understand it better.	89.47	10.53	0.00
I am comfortable using it for academic related purposes.	89.47	10.53	0.00
It is used as a medium of communication.	100.00	0.00	0.00

Source: Zulu, 2017

The language adopted by the colleges to effectively communicate their brand is English and the target audience indicates that they prefer this language and understand it better than their own African languages. The use of English by the colleges appeals to the target audiences' desires (Taillard, 2012). However, the continued choice of English as the sole language of marketing in a multilingual country exposes the colleges as perpetuating the value of English in the linguistic market (Wang & Hatoss, 2023). Brand managers appear to lack an understanding of the politics of language that enable other languages to gain and maintain power over other languages (Heller, 1995). English continues to be valued as a form of wealth or capital that influences certain groups in society to perceive it as a language of power (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991, 2000).

5. CONCLUSION

English continues to be valued as having the exchange value in the linguistic market. The brand managers of TVET Colleges appear to understand that their target audience prefers English that they also aspire to acquire and be proficient in it. The issue with this position is that it ignores transformative policies in the country that are aligned to the multilingual nature of society. African languages have gained recognition in many business sectors as effective communication languages that can be used to market brands to the majority of African citizens. African languages are often used alongside English as a recognition of the equal status they now enjoy in the democratic South Africa. The use of African languages in this manner provides them with the exchange value that is also likely to contribute to positive attitudes towards them. TVET Colleges need to revisit their choice of English as the sole language of marketing. The effort they put in when simplifying English is to be commended and should be transferred to the teaching and learning environment so as to address the attrition rates in the sector.

The small sample size at 40 is acknowledged as a limitation on this study. The results cannot therefore be taken to be the true representation of all TVET Colleges students. Moreover, the selected colleges were in areas where they were able to attract students from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds which would force lecturers and students to rely on English as a common language of communication. The results might have been different had the study been conducted in TVET Colleges found in rural areas and townships dominated by African students and lecturers only.

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