



An Examination of Euphemisms and Cultural Taboos in Teaching the Life Sciences Reproductive System in Xitsonga

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Abstract

African languages are humanistic and respectful, discouraging vulgar expressions. They employ alternative words and phrases to replace those considered harsh or offensive. Within Vatsonga cultural norms and beliefs, certain terms in the study of Life Sciences are not permitted to be mentioned explicitly. As scholars increasingly advocate for African languages as media of instruction in schools, it becomes crucial to reflect on how sensitive subjects, such as Life Sciences, can be appropriately taught. Several words relating to the reproductive system in Life Sciences are frowned upon when teaching in Xitsonga. The aim of this paper is to investigate words regarded as vulgar in teaching the reproductive system in Life Sciences while considering Xitsonga cultural norms and values. The paper draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the relationship between individuals and their sociocultural context. A qualitative approach was used, employing a corpus method to extract words deemed vulgar from the Grade 12 Via Afrika Life Sciences study guide.

Keywords

sociolinguistics, taboo language, classroom pedagogy, indigenous knowledge, language of instruction

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

African languages are deeply rooted in cultural and moral values that promote respect and human dignity. As Baloyi (2023) notes, these languages are "humanistic and respectful languages that forbid the use of vulgar language." In the context of education, especially in culturally sensitive subjects like Life Sciences, the use of African languages raises critical questions about how to communicate scientific content in a manner that aligns with cultural norms. This is particularly relevant in the case of Xitsonga, a language spoken by the Vatsonga people, whose traditions discourage the explicit mention of certain anatomical and reproductive terms considered vulgar or inappropriate in public discourse. As efforts intensify to adopt African languages as media of instruction in schools, it becomes essential to reflect on how subjects like Life Sciences, especially topics such as the human reproductive system, can be taught effectively and respectfully within such cultural frameworks. While research in the broader field of language, culture, and education has expanded, little attention has been given specifically to how cultural taboos influence the teaching of scientific subjects in Xitsonga. Previous studies, such as those by Marhanele (2017) and Golele (2013), have explored grammatical aspects and euphemistic expressions in Xitsonga. They emphasize that certain terms, particularly those related to the human body and sexuality, should be euphemized to maintain cultural decorum. Phakula (2011), in her master's dissertation, echoed similar sentiments by illustrating how words like *marhaku* (buttocks) are considered taboo and are often replaced with more acceptable terms such as *switshamo* or *swisuti*. These findings highlight the prevalence of euphemism in Xitsonga and suggest that euphemistic strategies are essential for culturally sensitive communication. Euphemisms, as observed by Qi Pan (2013), serve as a linguistic tool to navigate topics that are socially or culturally sensitive. In many cultures, direct

references to sex or reproductive organs are avoided through softer expressions such as "go to bed together" or "have relations," which replace more explicit terms. Yang Hua (2020) further emphasizes that language is not just a vehicle for communication but a powerful cultural and social phenomenon. Taboos and euphemisms, therefore, are not merely linguistic tools; they are embedded cultural practices that help speakers maintain social harmony and avoid offending others. This paper aims to examine the words and expressions considered vulgar when teaching the reproductive system in Life Sciences in Xitsonga, considering the cultural norms and values of the Vatsonga people. By adopting Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the importance of the interaction between individuals and their sociocultural environment, this qualitative study utilizes the corpus method to extract taboo and euphemistic terms from the Grade 12 *Via Afrika* Life Sciences study guide. In doing so, it provides insights into how educators can navigate linguistic and cultural constraints while promoting scientific literacy in African languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interplay between language, culture, and education presents a complex dynamic, particularly when culturally sensitive topics must be taught in indigenous African languages. In societies where linguistic expression is governed by deep-rooted norms and taboos, educators face the challenge of balancing scientific accuracy with cultural appropriateness. The teaching of the human reproductive system in Life Sciences, especially in languages like Xitsonga, is one such area where euphemism plays a critical role.

Language, Culture, and Social Norms

Language is a key vehicle for expressing culture and transmitting societal values. According to Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), linguistic choices are often determined by social and cultural contexts, and speakers naturally avoid words that might violate communal norms. In many African societies, discussions around sexuality, anatomy, and bodily functions are highly regulated, with strong social codes discouraging direct reference to certain topics. These taboos are not only linguistic but also socio-cultural constraints that affect communication in formal and informal settings, including education. Mbiti (1991) affirms that African cultural systems, including their languages, are founded on principles of respect, modesty, and discretion, especially in matters related to sex, reproduction, and the human body. This cultural orientation influences how certain subjects are received by learners and teachers, often requiring the use of softened or symbolic language to maintain respect and avoid discomfort.

Euphemism as a Linguistic Strategy

Euphemism is a universal linguistic phenomenon used to avoid direct or offensive expressions. Allan and Burridge (2006) define euphemisms as "sweet-sounding" substitutes for words or expressions that might be deemed unpleasant, inappropriate, or taboo. In educational contexts, euphemisms help to navigate sensitive topics without undermining the message or alienating the audience. Particularly in African language classrooms, euphemisms act as a bridge between cultural norms and curriculum demands. In their research on language and taboo, Burridge (2012) argues that euphemism is not simply about politeness, but about managing cultural sensitivities and upholding social values. In contexts where scientific content demands explicitness, euphemism provides a culturally acceptable means to convey information while avoiding offense.

Cultural Taboos in African Educational Contexts

Cultural taboos have a significant impact on curriculum delivery and learner engagement, especially when indigenous languages are used in instruction. Nyaga and Anthonissen (2012) explain that the use of African languages in education must consider the cultural beliefs and practices of the learners. When sensitive content is delivered using culturally inappropriate language, it can create barriers to learning, including embarrassment, misunderstanding, or resistance. Furthermore, Makalela (2015) explores how African multilingual classrooms often operate under both formal linguistic codes and informal cultural norms. In subjects like Life Sciences, where the reproductive system is discussed, teachers are often forced to code-switch or use euphemistic forms to maintain cultural propriety. This creates a unique pedagogical situation where scientific precision and cultural sensitivity must coexist.

Implications for Teaching Life Sciences

Teaching topics related to human reproduction in African languages like Xitsonga requires a nuanced understanding of both linguistic and cultural dimensions. As Banda (2009) notes, the tension between indigenous language norms and Western curricular standards can create pedagogical dilemmas, especially in science education. While the curriculum may demand clarity and accuracy, cultural expectations may discourage the explicit naming of certain body parts or functions. To navigate these challenges, teachers often rely on euphemisms or metaphors to communicate reproductive content in ways that are respectful and acceptable within the community. However, this raises questions about comprehension, scientific accuracy, and learner empowerment. If euphemisms obscure meaning or promote misinformation, learners may struggle to fully grasp essential biological concepts.

The reviewed literature emphasizes the importance of understanding euphemism and taboo not merely as linguistic curiosities but as crucial factors influencing educational practice in African contexts. In Xitsonga-speaking communities, cultural taboos around sexuality and the human body require educators to adopt context-sensitive approaches when

teaching Life Sciences. Euphemisms serve as an essential linguistic tool in this process, allowing teachers to respect cultural values while delivering sensitive scientific content. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse by focusing specifically on the reproductive system and how it is taught within Xitsonga linguistic and cultural frameworks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that synthesizes Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the principles of Cultural Linguistics to systematically investigate the role of euphemisms and cultural taboos in the pedagogical approach to the reproductive system as presented in the Life Sciences curriculum, utilizing Xitsonga. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory posits that learning constitutes a socially mediated process wherein individuals construct knowledge through interactions with others in ways that are culturally and linguistically meaningful (Vygotsky, 1978). When addressing sensitive subjects such as human reproduction, the language employed by educators and within textbooks is inherently non-neutral; it is reflective of the values and norms prevalent within the surrounding community. Within Xitsonga-speaking communities, direct references to reproductive organs and sexual functions are frequently deemed inappropriate, leading to the utilization of euphemisms that uphold cultural values of respect and dignity (Baloyi, 2023). From a Vygotskian perspective, the application of euphemisms can be conceptualized as a form of mediation, a linguistic tool employed by more knowledgeable individuals, such as educators and textbooks, to assist learners in accessing culturally sensitive knowledge within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Daniels, 2001).

While euphemisms may facilitate cultural sensitivity and mitigate discomfort, they may simultaneously obscure scientific accuracy. Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding suggests that temporary support mechanisms should be utilized to help learners bridge the gap between their pre-existing knowledge and the requisite academic content. Without adequate clarification of euphemistic language, learners may remain within socially acceptable bounds without attaining a comprehensive understanding of the biological content. This scenario engenders a significant challenge in ensuring that scaffolding is both culturally appropriate and scientifically effective. To deepen the understanding of the cultural motivations underpinning euphemistic language, this study also engages with the principles of Cultural Linguistics, which explore how language both reflects and shapes the cultural conceptualizations of its speakers (Sharifian, 2017). Euphemistic expressions in Xitsonga, such as the substitution of *marhaku* (buttocks) with *switshamo* or *swisuti*, transcend mere stylistic choices; they are entrenched within collective cultural schemas that associate direct anatomical references with notions of disrespect or shame (Phakula, 2011; Golele, 2013; Marhanele, 2017). These expressions serve to preserve social harmony, a purpose documented across various cultural contexts (Qi Pan, 2013; Yang Hua, 2020). Consequently, euphemistic strategies reflect not only an aversion to taboo topics but are also profoundly rooted in shared cultural knowledge and moral values.

By integrating Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory alongside Cultural Linguistics, this framework offers a robust lens through which to analyse the linguistic and cultural adaptations inherent in educational contexts. It enables researchers to explore how euphemisms in the Grade 12 Via Afrika Life Sciences textbook function as mediational tools shaped by cultural norms and how such tools influence learners' comprehension of human reproduction. This dual framework also serves to inform critical reflections on the promotion of scientific literacy while honouring the linguistic and cultural identities of Xitsonga-speaking learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, which is particularly effective for examining the intricate social and cultural meanings embedded within educational texts. Qualitative research facilitates a comprehensive understanding of language use, symbolism, and contextual factors, especially when addressing culturally sensitive topics such as reproduction. This methodological approach allows the researcher to investigate how euphemisms and taboos are represented in educational materials, particularly in contexts where linguistic and cultural dynamics significantly influence teaching and learning (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2020).

The data for this investigation is gathered from the *Grade 12 Via Afrika Life Sciences Learner's Book*, a curriculum-aligned textbook that is widely utilized in South African schools. The focus of the analysis was directed specifically toward the sections that address the human reproductive system. This textbook was selected due to its status as one of the officially prescribed learning materials, thus reflecting the content that most learners and educators engage with in classroom settings (Department of Basic Education, 2020). By conducting an analysis of this textbook, the study aims to elucidate how reproductive content is presented within the cultural and linguistic frameworks relevant to Xitsonga-speaking learners.

The analysis methodology employed was thematic textual analysis. The researcher systematically interrogated the content to identify recurring patterns in language use, particularly instances of euphemisms, avoidance strategies, or vague terminology that may serve to soften or obscure direct references to reproductive anatomy and functions. Furthermore, the analysis considered the presence or absence of certain topics, which may be deemed culturally taboo within Xitsonga-speaking communities. These emergent themes were subsequently interpreted to assess their implications for how learners might receive or interpret the information presented (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Through this methodological framework, the study aspires to uncover the extent to which linguistic choices in educational texts may align with or challenge cultural expectations, potentially influencing learners' comprehension and comfort when engaging with content in the life sciences. This approach offers critical insights into the intersection of

cultural values and educational discourse, particularly in the context of South Africa's multilingual and multicultural landscape.

DISCUSSION: EUPHEMISMS AND CULTURAL TABOOS IN TEACHING LIFE SCIENCES IN XITSONGA

Xitsonga, like many African languages, is governed by deep-rooted cultural values and norms that influence language use, especially in educational settings. Certain biological and reproductive terms are considered vulgar or taboo and are therefore culturally inappropriate to be mentioned explicitly in public, particularly in classroom environments (Baloyi, 2023). In such contexts, euphemisms provide a respectful and effective solution to maintain cultural sensitivity while ensuring that academic content is accurately conveyed. This discussion explores various reproductive terms found in the Life Sciences curriculum and offers suitable euphemistic alternatives that align with the cultural norms of the Vatsonga community. This necessitates a curriculum structure that equips learners with an understanding of figurative language to ensure comprehension and reduce ambiguity (Yang Hua, 2020). The following discussion is organised into three categories, namely: teaching male reproductive anatomy, teaching female reproductive anatomy, and teaching reproductive processes that involve both male and female anatomy.

Teaching Male Reproductive Anatomy

Sperm

Sperm are the male gametes (sex cells) produced in the seminiferous tubules of the testes. Each sperm cell contains half the genetic information required for the formation of a new human being and is designed to fertilize a female egg (Marieb and Hoehn, 2019). When teaching male reproduction in Life Sciences, euphemism provides a culturally sensitive solution to address words that are not permitted to be mentioned explicitly, particularly in consideration of Xitsonga cultural norms and values. For instance, the word sperm "*vubyonyo*" is considered inappropriate and vulgar when mentioned directly in Xitsonga. While in English, it is acceptable for a teacher to use the term sperm in the classroom, this level of directness may not be culturally appropriate or acceptable in many African languages due to sociolinguistic norms and taboos (Msimanga, 1994). To navigate this, teachers can use a euphemism, such as "*mbewu ya vununa*", which literally translates to 'the seed of a man'. This alternative is widely accepted and maintains the dignity of the learning environment while preserving the educational intent.

Penis

The penis is the external male sexual organ responsible for delivering sperm during sexual intercourse and for urination. It contains erectile tissue that allows it to become erect during arousal (Tortora and Derrickson, 2018). In the chapter on the reproductive system in Life Sciences, the word penis presents a cultural challenge when teaching in Xitsonga due to the norms and values of the Vatsonga community. The word "*mbolo*" is regarded as crude and offensive, and its use in educational contexts is often avoided (Phakula, 2011). While the word penis is acceptable in English in a classroom setting, the equivalent term in Xitsonga, "*mbolo*" is considered vulgar and inappropriate. To navigate this cultural sensitivity, teachers can use a euphemism such as "*xirho xa vunana*", which is more culturally acceptable. This euphemistic phrase respects the cultural value of linguistic modesty while ensuring that the anatomical function is communicated effectively. Euphemisms like these not only reflect linguistic creativity but also underscore the importance of culturally adaptive pedagogy in African language education (Gao, 2013). Euphemism thus becomes a practical solution for maintaining respect for cultural values while teaching sensitive topics.

Ejaculation

Ejaculation is the process by which semen, containing sperm, is forcefully expelled from the male urethra during orgasm. It is a reflex action controlled by the sympathetic nervous system (Guyton and Hall, 2021). The term ejaculation also appears in the Life Sciences chapter on reproduction. In many African languages, including Xitsonga, discussing this process explicitly is considered taboo due to cultural norms and values. Consequently, teachers must use euphemisms to navigate these sensitivities in a classroom setting. A common phrase is "*ku humesa mbewu*", which aligns better with cultural expectations of Vatsonga speaking people and which is widely accepted and can be pronounced explicitly, even in the classroom environment. The direct term "*ku rhundza*" is often deemed inappropriate for classroom use, especially in mixed-gender environments, where it could provoke embarrassment or laughter among learners (Phakula, 2011). Euphemism, therefore, becomes an essential tool for addressing this topic respectfully while maintaining cultural appropriateness. Euphemisms like this are not merely lexical substitutions; they are integral to maintaining the moral decorum expected in traditional Vatsonga settings (Marhanele, 2017).

Testicles

The testicles are oval-shaped male reproductive glands located in the scrotum. They produce sperm and the hormone testosterone, which regulates male secondary sexual characteristics (Marieb and Hoehn, 2019). In teaching the Life Sciences reproduction system, explaining the term testicles poses cultural challenges in a Xitsonga classroom. While discussing this term in English is straightforward and widely accepted, using the Xitsonga equivalent, "*makendze*", is considered inappropriate due to cultural norms and values. This creates a challenge, especially as educators advocate for teaching school subjects in mother tongues to promote understanding and cultural relevance. To address this, a teacher

may use the euphemism "*swirho swa mbeleko*" when referring to testicles. Euphemism thus serves as a culturally respectful solution, albeit one that necessitates additional effort to ensure clarity and comprehension. However, due to the vague nature of some euphemisms, additional clarification may be needed to avoid conceptual ambiguity (Yang Hua, 2020). This again emphasizes the importance of curriculum design that fosters linguistic competence in metaphorical and euphemistic expression.

Scrotum

The scrotum is a pouch of skin that contains and protects the testicles. It regulates the temperature of the testes, keeping them slightly cooler than body temperature for optimal sperm production (Tortora and Derrickson, 2018). In English, using the term scrotum in the classroom is clear, appropriate, and widely accepted. In Xitsonga, discussing the term scrotum in the classroom is clear, appropriate, straightforward, and widely accepted, using the Xitsonga equivalent, which is "*dzovo ro sirhelela makendze*", is considered inappropriate due to cultural norms and values. However, in Xitsonga, referring to the scrotum as "*xipachi*" can lead to confusion among learners, as the word "*xipachi*" has multiple meanings. In addition to referring to the scrotum, "*xipachi*" can also mean a wallet used for holding money and plastic cards. This ambiguity highlights the importance of carefully choosing words in culturally sensitive contexts. This dual meaning highlights the necessity of contextual learning and the careful introduction of anatomical terminology in mother-tongue education (Gao, 2013). To avoid confusion, a Life Sciences teacher may need to clarify the meaning of "*xipachi*" within the specific context of the lesson, ensuring learners understand its intended use as part of the male reproductive system.

Male condom

A male condom is a sheath, usually made of latex or polyurethane, that covers the penis during sexual intercourse to prevent pregnancy and protect against sexually transmitted infections (WHO, 2023). In the Life Science chapter on the reproductive system, the term condom is used, and in Xitsonga, it is referred to as "*khondomu ya xinuna*". However, this term can provoke laughter in the classroom due to Xitsonga cultural standards and values that discourage openly speaking about such topics. The solution is to use euphemisms to maintain a respectful and comfortable environment. The teacher should refer to the male condom as "*jasi ra xinuna*", which is a culturally appropriate and considerate phrasing.

Teaching Female Reproductive Anatomy

Vagina

The vagina is a muscular, elastic canal that connects the cervix to the external body. It serves as the birth canal, the passageway for menstrual flow, and the organ of intercourse in females (Marieb and Hoehn, 2019). The word vagina is another term encountered in the Life Sciences chapter on reproduction that poses cultural challenges when teaching in Xitsonga. While scientifically accurate and socially neutral in English, the Xitsonga equivalent "*xitombo*" is considered highly vulgar and offensive (Baloyi, 2023). Using this word in a classroom setting would create discomfort and awkwardness between the teacher and learners, as it is not deemed acceptable to say it openly. To address this, teachers often resort to euphemisms such as "*xirho xa xisati*", which aligns with Xitsonga cultural sensitivities. Teachers must be cautious to reinforce these euphemisms with visual aids or additional contextual explanation to ensure comprehension is maintained (Wardhaugh, 2000). Nonetheless, using euphemisms offers a respectful and culturally appropriate approach to teaching sensitive topics while navigating these linguistic and cultural constraints.

Clitoris

The clitoris is a highly sensitive, erectile structure located at the top of the vulva. It is the primary organ for female sexual pleasure and contains thousands of nerve endings (Tortora and Derrickson, 2018). There are several terms in the female reproductive systems that, due to Xitsonga cultural norms and beliefs, should not be explicitly emphasized in the classroom, the word clitoris is one of such term. While it is straightforward and permissible to use the word clitoris in English during a Life Sciences lesson, the Xitsonga equivalent, "*ntsingi*", is deemed vulgar and inappropriate in the classroom. Using this term would likely cause discomfort and unease among learners. To address this cultural sensitivity, a teacher could euphemize the word clitoris using a word like "*neve*", which is more acceptable in everyday conversation. Teachers must carefully navigate this balance to ensure learners comprehend the content while respecting cultural norms.

Labour

Labour is the process by which the uterus contracts to expel the fetus during childbirth. It consists of several stages, including cervical dilation, delivery of the baby, and expulsion of the placenta (Guyton and Hall, 2021). When teaching the reproduction system in Life Sciences, the term labour is integral to the topic. However, in Xitsonga, cultural norms and beliefs consider the direct translations, "*ku veleka*" or "*ku tswala*", to be vulgar and inappropriate for classroom use. While the term labour can be easily and appropriately used in English during lessons, but in Xitsonga may cause discomfort and awkwardness for teachers and learners due to cultural sensitivities. Teachers must use the euphemism "*nkarhi wo ntshuxeka*" (time of relief) to align with these cultural norms. Teachers must ensure clarity by supplementing euphemistic language with additional explanations, visual aids, or context to help learners understand the biological processes of labour and childbirth while respecting cultural values. This approach strikes a balance between cultural sensitivity and effective teaching.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is the physiological condition in which a fertilized egg develops into a fetus inside a woman's uterus. It typically lasts about 40 weeks from the last menstrual period to childbirth (WHO, 2023). Discussing pregnancy is essential when teaching about the reproductive system in Life Sciences. In English, it is straightforward and widely accepted to use the term pregnancy in the classroom, as the language permits clear and direct expression. However, when teaching in Xitsonga, the cultural norms and values make it challenging to use the word “nyimba” without causing discomfort. This term, though accurate, is often considered inappropriate in an educational setting due to cultural sensitivities. To address this, teachers may use euphemisms such as “ku tika” (to be heavy) or “ku biha emirhini” (to be unwell in the body). To bridge this gap, teachers can provide supplementary explanations, use visual aids, or incorporate relatable examples to clarify pregnancy's biological and physiological aspects. This approach ensures respect for cultural norms while maintaining the integrity of the lesson content.

Reproductive processes involving both male and female anatomy

Pubic hair

Pubic hair refers to the hair that grows in the genital area during puberty due to hormonal changes. It is a secondary sexual characteristic found in both males and females (Tortora and Derrickson, 2018). When teaching the reproductive system in the biological sciences, certain terms require careful consideration due to Xitsonga cultural norms and beliefs. One such term is pubic hair. While it is straightforward and acceptable in English for a teacher to use the term pubic hair in the classroom when discussing the reproductive system, using the equivalent term “makaka” in Xitsonga is considered vulgar and culturally inappropriate. To maintain a respectful and sensitive classroom environment, the solution lies in using euphemisms. The teacher should refer to pubic hair as “misisi ya le xihundleni”, a more culturally acceptable phrase.

Urine

Urine is a liquid waste product produced by the kidneys and excreted from the body through the urinary system. While not part of the reproductive system, the urethra, which carries urine out of the body, is anatomically connected to the reproductive system, especially in males, where it also carries semen (Marieb and Hoehn, 2019). In the Life Sciences reproduction system chapter, addressing this term in Xitsonga can be challenging due to cultural norms and values. The Xitsonga word for urine, “murhundzu”, is considered inappropriate to say openly in a classroom setting, as it may elicit laughter or discomfort among learners. To maintain cultural sensitivity, a teacher can use the euphemism “mitsakamiso”, which is more acceptable in this context, while euphemisms like this help align with cultural expectations.

Sexual intercourse

Sexual intercourse refers to the act of penetration of the vagina by the penis, enabling the delivery of sperm into the female reproductive tract for the possibility of fertilization. It is a function that involves both male and female reproductive systems and is essential for natural conception (Stöppler, 2021). Sexual intercourse is a term often discussed in the Life Sciences chapter on reproduction. While academics advocate for teaching in African languages to promote inclusivity and understanding, addressing this term in Xitsonga poses significant challenges due to cultural norms and values. The direct translations of sexual intercourse in Xitsonga are “ku kundzana” or “ku nyovana” which are considered vulgar and inappropriate for classroom use. To navigate this, a teacher must use euphemisms such as “ku etlelana” or “ku endla timhaka ta masangu”, which are more culturally acceptable. This highlights the delicate balance teachers must maintain between cultural sensitivity and academic clarity when teaching sensitive topics in African languages.

Sexual excitement

Sexual excitement is the arousal phase of the sexual response cycle and includes physiological changes such as increased blood flow to the genitals, erection in males, and lubrication and swelling in females. This process is regulated by the nervous and endocrine systems in both sexes (Tortora and Derrickson, 2018). As academics, we advocate for using African languages in teaching academic disciplines to promote inclusivity and understanding. However, Xitsonga cultural norms and values often necessitate using euphemisms to address sensitive topics, especially in the context of the Life Sciences reproduction system. For example, it is considered inappropriate and suggestive of poor upbringing to use terms such as “ku nandzikeriwa hi ku kundza” or “ku nandzikeriwa hi ku kundziwa” when referring to sexual excitement in the classroom. These phrases are culturally taboo and not suitable for an educational environment. In English, sexual excitement it can be discussed openly in a classroom setting. However, in Xitsonga, teachers must use euphemisms such as “ku tiphina hi swa masangu” (a state of restlessness) or similar phrases that align with cultural sensitivities. This approach balances cultural respect with academic accuracy.

Sexual sensation

Sexual sensation refers to the sensory and psychological experiences during sexual activity, such as pleasure or arousal. It involves nerve endings, brain activity, and hormonal changes in both males and females (Guyton and Hall, 2021). According to the cultural norms and beliefs of the Vatsonga people, the term sexual sensation cannot be explicitly used in Xitsonga when teaching the reproduction system in Life Sciences. While the term sexual sensation can be used in

English without issue in a classroom setting, its Xitsonga equivalent, “*ku dzodzisa munhu*”, is considered offensive and culturally inappropriate. Learners may find this phrase disrespectful due to the values and standards associated with the Xitsonga language. To address this, a teacher must select a culturally sensitive and friendly term, such as “*ku titwa ka rimbewu*”, to convey the concept. Teachers must carefully navigate these cultural sensitivities while ensuring learners understand the biological processes being discussed, possibly by providing additional explanations or using diagrams and visual aids to clarify the topic.

Urethra

The urethra is a tubular structure that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body. In males, it also transports semen during ejaculation, making it part of both the urinary and reproductive systems. In females, the urethra has only a urinary function and is shorter in length (Marieb and Hoehn, 2019). Another term commonly encountered in the Life Sciences reproductive system is the urethra. However, in many African languages, including Xitsonga, explicitly discussing this term is often avoided due to cultural norms and beliefs that regard it as inappropriate in public or educational settings. In a classroom environment, teachers must carefully choose culturally acceptable language to explain the urethra. The euphemism “*xiphayiphana xo ba mati*” (tube for releasing water) may be used to align with cultural expectations. The accurate Xitsonga term, “*xiphayiphana xa murhundzu*” (urine tube), is more precise but considered improper for classroom use due to cultural sensitivities. To address these challenges, teachers should supplement euphemistic language with clear explanations, visual aids, or diagrams to help learners grasp the anatomical and functional aspects of the urethra while respecting cultural values. This approach ensures both comprehension and cultural appropriateness in the teaching process.

FINDINGS

The analysis demonstrates that teaching reproductive system topics in Xitsonga presents notable cultural and linguistic challenges, largely due to deep-rooted cultural norms and taboos surrounding explicit sexual and anatomical terminology. Many direct Xitsonga translations of reproductive terms are regarded as vulgar, offensive, or inappropriate for public discussion, especially in classroom environments with mixed genders. Such language use can provoke embarrassment, laughter, or discomfort, hindering effective teaching and learning. Teachers, therefore, often resort to euphemisms to navigate these cultural sensitivities, using alternative phrases that are respectful and more socially acceptable within the Vatsonga community. While these euphemisms preserve classroom decorum and uphold cultural values, they sometimes lead to ambiguity or incomplete understanding if not supported by additional clarification.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that while euphemisms serve as a practical pedagogical tool, they require deliberate and strategic application to ensure that the scientific meaning is not lost. Learners, particularly those unfamiliar with figurative expressions, may misinterpret euphemistic language without explicit teaching on its meaning and usage. This challenge is heightened in the context of mother-tongue instruction, where the balance between cultural respect and academic precision must be maintained. Effective use of euphemisms, therefore, necessitates complementary teaching strategies such as visual aids, contextual examples, and bilingual explanations to bridge potential gaps in comprehension. Without such measures, cultural sensitivity may come at the cost of conceptual clarity in the Life Sciences curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges identified in teaching reproductive system topics in Xitsonga, it is recommended that the Life Sciences curriculum be adapted to include explicit guidelines on the use of culturally appropriate euphemisms for sensitive terms, accompanied by clear explanations to ensure accurate scientific understanding. Teachers should receive specialised professional development focused on using euphemisms effectively while maintaining conceptual clarity through bilingual instruction, contextual explanations, and visual aids. Introducing figurative and euphemistic language skills early in the curriculum will prepare learners to interpret such expressions correctly, reducing the risk of misunderstanding. A bilingual approach, pairing euphemistic Xitsonga terms with standard scientific English, will not only enhance comprehension but also promote linguistic competence in both languages.

Culturally sensitive teaching aids, such as labelled diagrams, charts, and multimedia resources, should be developed to supplement verbal explanations and reinforce learning. Teachers are encouraged to create a respectful classroom environment by establishing clear guidelines for discussing sensitive topics and by using strategies such as role-play or guided discussions to normalise respectful discourse. Collaboration with parents, elders, and cultural leaders is essential in validating and refining euphemistic terms, ensuring they remain both culturally acceptable and scientifically accurate. Furthermore, educational authorities should provide regular refresher courses for teachers to update them on evolving cultural norms and acceptable terminology. Pre-service teacher training programmes should also incorporate modules on culturally sensitive science teaching, including the strategic use of euphemisms. Finally, continuous monitoring and research should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of euphemism-based instruction, allowing for the sharing of best practices and the ongoing refinement of culturally responsive pedagogy in Life Sciences.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while euphemisms provide an essential bridge between cultural sensitivity and scientific accuracy in teaching reproductive system topics in Xitsonga, their effective use requires careful planning, teacher

preparedness, and curriculum support. Direct translations of reproductive terms often conflict with cultural norms, creating barriers to open discussion and comprehension in the classroom. By strategically employing euphemisms alongside bilingual instruction, visual aids, and contextual explanations, educators can respect cultural values without compromising academic precision. However, this balance is only sustainable when supported by structured teacher training, culturally validated resources, and ongoing dialogue between educators, communities, and curriculum developers. Ultimately, embracing culturally responsive strategies such as euphemism use not only preserves classroom decorum but also promotes inclusivity, deeper understanding, and respect for both scientific knowledge and cultural heritage in Life Sciences education.

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