

Determining Strategies that Teachers Employ in order to Improve Learners' Skills and Competencies in Learning Effectively

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ABSTRACT The aim of the research was to determine strategies teachers employ in order to improve learners' skills and competencies in learning effectively. This paper was underpinned by critical discourse analysis. It involved an analysis of the merits and demerits of the implementation of new teaching strategies in South African schools. Qualitative research assisted the researcher to determine strategies teachers employ. Data were analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting information to provide explanation. It has been established in this paper that some teachers have changed the way they used to teach after the introduction of the new teaching and learning strategies, while other teachers did not change. There is need to shift from teacher centred to learner centred approaches to teaching as well as a shift from teaching to learning to enhance thinking and reflection among learners and to use learners' prior knowledge and experiences. The teachers also need to shift from content based curriculum to competence-based curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The apartheid education system disadvantaged the majority of South Africans especially the Black communities. A new democracy demanded change in many spheres of life in South Africa in particular in education. Among other reforms proposed by the Government of National Unity (GNU) was transformational outcomes-based education. This ushered Curriculum 2005, Revised National Curriculum Statement and the National Curriculum Statement with emphasis on outcomes-based education. There was consensus about transforming education in South Africa by different stakeholders in education in order to change the education system and introduce a new curriculum.

Killen (1998), also describes outcomes-based education as an approach to planning, delivering and evaluating instruction that require teachers and students to focus their attention and efforts on the desired end results of education. The emphasis in outcomes-based education is involving learners in learning activities that would lead them to achieve particular learning outcomes. The Department of Education took a transformative approach to outcomes-based education with emphasis on critical outcomes. Critical outcomes are broad educational goals

or a set of skills, attitudes and knowledge that all learners should demonstrate after being exposed to learning and teaching. The government was actually trying to come up with a new education system which would cater for all its citizens regardless of race, culture, gender, creed or religion.

However, the changes in education had an impact on the attitude, moral and performance of teachers in general. These changes required a paradigm shift on the part of the teachers. The introduction of outcomes-based education made many demands on both the teachers and the education system. Teachers had to change the way they used to plan and teach while on the other hand learners had to change the way they used to learn. The new curriculum required that teachers should be able to understand and respond flexibly to the challenges of the new approaches to curriculum, methods and strategies.

According to Samuels (2009), research is designed to solve a particular existing problem so that there is a much larger audience eager to support research that is likely to be profitable or solve problems of immediate concern. Based on research, management can make intelligent and informed decisions (Moorty 2010). It is for that reason that, this research is necessary for education policy makers in realising how teaching

and learning is affected by the various strategies that teachers employ in order to improve learners' skills and competencies in learning effectively. It is hoped that the study will also inform policy makers about problems experienced by teachers in the implementation of the new teaching strategies.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper were to determine the various strategies and techniques that teachers employ in their classes and how learners respond to the new teaching and learning policies.

Theoretical Framework

According to Terre Blanche (2007), refining a research problem involves identifying a theoretical framework upon which to base the research. This paper was underpinned by a critical discourse analysis theory in which the researcher expressed his comments or judgements based on written or spoken communications, discussions or conversations with teachers. It involved an analysis of the merits and demerits of the implementation of new teaching strategies in South African schools. Thus, critical discourse analysis was considered an appropriate framework to engage and converse about the research problem of this paper.

McGregor (2010) sees critical discourse analysis as a tool to help members of the profession understand the messages they are sending to themselves and others and to understand the meanings of the words spoken and written by others. Furthermore, Locke (2004) argues that language is at the heart of critical discourse analysis. Language is an imperative aspect in teaching and learning as all learning areas/subjects are taught through language. Critical discourse analysis involves debating or communicating in either spoken or written form. Discussions with participants in this paper assisted in revealing motivations behind texts. Teaching and learning processes and activities are either in spoken or written form. Teachers should have appropriate knowledge of teaching strategies in order to improve learners' skills and competencies in learning effectively.

Critical discourse analysis is primarily positioned in the environment of language and its

successes can be measured with a measuring rod of the study of languages. Language can be used to represent speakers' beliefs, positions and ideas in terms of spoken texts like conversations. Written or oral messages convey meanings if we analyse the underlying meaning of the words. Analysis of underlying meanings can assist in interpreting issues, conditions and events in which teachers find themselves. Using words can direct/assist those in control of the education system. Critical discourse analysis can only make a significant and specific contribution to critical social or political analyses if it is able to provide an account of the role of language, language use, discourse or communicative events in the production of dominance and inequality (McGregor 2010; Van Dijk 2006).

According to Wodak (2009), critical means not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism and dichotomies, being self-reflective in research, and through these processes, making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies. Teaching strategies should be appropriately and critically analysed and described to enable their effective improvements of learners' skills and competencies to learn effectively.

METHODOLOGY

Sridhar (2006) defines the research design as a conceptual structure, a blueprint, an outline of what the researcher will do in terms of selection of a problem, formulation of the selected problem, formulation of hypothesis, conceptualisation and research design. Tompkins (2008) further states that researchers can design a study to characterise a single instance of a phenomenon or take an inference about a phenomenon in a population via a sample. According to Arhar et al. (2005), the methodology adopted in a study provides information about how the research was conducted, not about what was learned. The research methodology of this paper was qualitative and inductively based. In this paper, teachers' knowledge was analysed and interpreted to achieve a common understanding of the strategies they employ in order to improve learners' skills and competencies in learning effectively. The researcher interacted actively with the participants and became part of the process of research but not acting or participating at a distance.

The target group and population of the study comprised experienced teachers who are teaching Grade 4 and 6 learners, English as First Additional Language (FAL) and have been in the field of teaching for ten or more years. Five schools in the Gauteng Department of Education's Gauteng North District were invited to participate in the study. The above description of the sample is an indication that a purposive sample was used in this paper. According to Soanes and Stevenson (2008), purposive refers to "having or done with a particular purpose". Schools were selected purposefully to the extent that they were regarded as rich sources of the knowledge the researcher intended gathering (Patton 1990). In this paper purposeful sampling was used to select informants with rich information.

According to Voce (2005), the primary methods of data collection in qualitative research are observation, interview and focus group discussion. Data collection is simply how information is gathered. In-depth formal interviewing was used as the main data collection method. Other data collecting techniques, such as classroom participant observation and informal conversations were used to supplement data collected through interviews. Data were also collected through observing and describing the experiences of the participants. The researcher interacted with the participants in order to get the most reliable information. To avoid manipulation, the researcher gave the participants equal opportunities to participate in the investigation. The researcher used focus group interviews and individual interviews to collect data. The researcher encouraged respondents to use their own terminology in describing their experiences. The reason for that was to allow the data to truly emerge from the respondents.

According to Denscombe (2007), focus group interviews are used to elicit data from a small group of people on a specific topic or theme. Walliman (2011) indicates that face to face interviews can be carried out in a variety of situations- in the home, at work, outdoors or while travelling. Focus groups are generally regarded as a useful way of exploring attitudes on non-sensitive, non-controversial topics. They can elicit contributions from interviewees who might otherwise be reluctant to contribute and, through their relatively informal interchanges, focus groups can lead to insights that might not otherwise have come to light through the one-

to-one conventional interviews. The researcher identified groups of five teachers per research field who participated in the interviews for thirty minutes to one hour. The interviewer was in good position to be able to judge the quality of the responses of the subjects, to notice if the question has not been properly understood, and to reassure and encourage the respondent to be full in his or her answers. Visual signs such as nods, smiles and others are valuable tools in promoting complete responses.

According to McLafferty (2006) the main advantages of focus group interviews is the purposeful use of intervention in order to generate data, they provide major insights into attitudes, beliefs and opinions, and they are particularly useful for reflecting the social realities of a cultural group, through direct access to the language and concepts which structure participants' experiences. Casey and Krueger (2009) indicate that focus groups can be used to provide information to decision-makers about opportunities at three different times: before, during or after the programme or service provided. Morgan (2007) advances three basic uses of focus group interviews, namely, where they are used as a self-contained method in studies where they serve as the principal source data, where they are used as supplementary source data in studies that rely on some other primary method, such as survey, and they are used in multi-method studies that combine two or more means of gathering data. The research method allows the researcher to explore reality and to discover what reality means for the participants from their own frame of reference. The researcher is able to understand the context or the world of existence from the perspective of the participants and can actually use the words or terminology as used by the participants themselves. For the purpose of this paper the use of focus group interviews was deemed relevant as it provided a learning experience for participants and ensured evaluation of such experiences.

Marshall and Rossman (2010) content that data collection and data analysis must be simultaneous process in qualitative research. The main task in data analysis is to make sense of the amount of data collected by reducing the volume of information, identifying significant patterns and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveals (McMillan and Schumacher 2011). Bazeley (2009)

indicates that data analysis approaches must always be chosen to match the questions being posed, and must be appropriate to the assumptions in place. Creswell (2009) goes on to support the concept of displays of information: a spatial format that presents information systematically to the reader. These displays of information show the relationship among the categories of information, displaying categories by informants, site, demographic variables, and chronology of information, role ordering and many other possibilities.

In this paper throughout the data analysis process data were coded using as many categories as possible. The purpose is to identify and describe patterns and themes from the perspective of the participants and an attempt be made to understand and explain these patterns and themes. During data analysis the data were organised categorically and coded and the responses were correlated with the prominent and emerging views identified in the literature survey. This process involves grouping of information, coding information of similar kind and genre and describing the information by inductive reasoning. After the major topics and sub-topics that emerge from interviews and document analyses had been identified, the data collected were arranged and categorised according to topics and subtopics. From these, categories and patterns that evolve were identified, labelled and interpreted.

According to Michelle (2007), qualitative data analysis consists of identifying, coding and categorising patterns found in the data. Bradley (2007) declares that once the data have been reviewed and there is a general understanding of the scope and contexts of the key experiences under study, coding provides the analyst with a formal system to organise data, uncovering and documenting additional links within and between concepts and experiences described in the data. Plooy (2007) defines data analysis as a process of bringing order and structure to the mass of collected data. Discourse analysis usually uses tapes so they can be played and replayed for several people discussing, not individual person specifically. Data were analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting information to provide explanation. Comparisons were drawn, similarities identified and a discussion of the research was presented. Once the data was generated, the researcher or-

ganised the data and discovered the relationships or patterns through close scrutiny of the data. The data were coded, categorised and condensed. The researcher then interpreted and drew meaning from the displayed data.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of this paper was to determine strategies that teachers employ in order to improve learners' skills and competencies in learning effectively. Apart from the examination of the teachers' work, teachers were also interviewed. A total of five lessons were observed and outlined for subsequent analysis. In order to present a holistic picture, the presentation of data is done pertaining to the teachers in the five schools. The teachers were between 30 and 60 years old, fully qualified (teaching diploma or degree) and have been teaching for more than 10 years.

The teachers were asked questions which related to the strategies they employed to improve learners' skills and competencies in learning effectively. The responses in all of the cases reflect the recurring themes. Where, necessary, verbatim reports have been included in order to present how teachers responded. The researcher asked questions and the participants responded voluntarily.

“Since the Introduction of the New Policies on Teaching and Learning, How Has Your Teaching Methodology Changed?”

Four teachers per school participated in this study, making a total of 20 teachers. In responding to the question above, 11 teachers said there were a few changes, while 9 teachers conceded that they have not changed the way they used to teach. One teacher added that her strategy has always been the same as she looks at the needs of her classes. Twelve teachers added that the new policies brought about only small changes: teachers now put more emphasis on spelling, comprehension, group activities and readers when teaching languages. This was vividly depicted by some of the teachers in the following statements:

Teacher C- “There is not that much change actually. Previously more emphasis was on writing and reading, and this is what we are still doing today”.

Teacher A- "The difference is only that in the past the teacher was supposed to develop his/her own teaching and learning materials, while today the Department of Education supply us with teaching and learning materials".

Teacher E- "I don't really differ from how I used to teach because in languages I focus on the reading skills and comprehension of texts".

The above responses were followed by another question to determine teachers' understanding of the role of learning outcomes in planning their lessons.

"What Role Do Learning Outcomes Play in Your Planning of the Lessons?"

The common themes in the teachers' responses indicated that six teachers were guided by the various learning outcomes when planning their lessons, while 14 teachers were not guided by the learning outcomes. A few of the verbatim responses are indicated below to present how teachers responded:

Teacher D- "I think the learning outcomes are just like a map because whatever you do you needs direction".

Teacher G- "For me some of the learning outcomes are appropriate but some not. I used to focus on grammar but the learning outcomes and assessment standards do not actually address what I want to teach".

Teacher F- "I always plan my lessons for the week or for the month according to certain things that must be done. I am not a person who just takes a policy and implement it. I do things according to my learners' needs. These learning outcomes and assessment standards do not make sense".

To help determine how the teachers understood various types of learning, the following question was asked:

"Explain What You Understand by Teacher-centred and Learner-centred Learning"

Twenty (20) teachers mentioned that teacher-centred learning is when the teacher imparts information to learners. They further described learner-centred learning as the type of learning where learners are engaged in the various learning activities and created their own meaning. In learner-centred learning the teacher remains a

facilitator. Below are some of the responses from the teachers:

Teacher F- "Teacher-centred learning means that the teacher is telling the learners all the information while in learner-centred learning learners are participating actively".

Teacher A- "The teacher gives instructions and the learners should comply while in learner-centred learning the learners are active participants".

Teacher F- "In teacher-centred learning the teacher informs the learners while in learner-centred learning the learners contribute to the process of learning".

The next question sought to establish the various tools used for assessment.

"Give Examples of Rubrics or Marking Grids You May Have Used for Assessment"

Seventeen (17) teachers interviewed mentioned assessment tools such as memos, rubrics and checklists. Twenty teachers conceded that the Department of Education supplied them with the tools necessary for assessment.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of research question one led to the conclusion discussed in this section of the report. It was found that some teachers have changed the way they used to teach after the introduction of the new teaching and learning policies, while other educators did not change. Learning outcomes played a significant role to some educators when planning their lessons, while other teachers were not guided by learning outcomes in planning their lessons. Teachers could clearly differentiate between teacher-centred and learner-centred learning. It was further found that the Department of Basic Education provided teachers with a variety of assessment tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Basic Education should train members of SMTs on how to monitor, evaluate and support teachers in terms of new teaching methodologies. It is imperative for all teachers to know the learning outcomes of the learning areas they are teaching. The HODs for various learning areas should empower teachers and

make sure that they know the learning outcomes of the learning areas they are responsible for. For learners to succeed in achieving learning outcomes, they must have teachers who know how to teach every learner to achieve high learning standard. Unfortunately, many teachers, especially in developing countries, do not have the necessary skills to do this nor are they equipped to confront the challenges and adverse conditions they face in trying to improve the quality of education in schools. Class size must be reduced to enable effective educator and learner interaction. Educators' interest, tolerance, innovativeness and competency in the subject matter will help sustain learners' interest in the learning activities.

The Department of Basic Education should ensure that all teachers in various schools and classrooms are competent to teach the learning areas/subjects they teach. The SMTs can also establish and maintain the culture of teaching and learning by creating positive relationships between educators, learners and the parents. Disciplined setting between teachers and learners should be maintained. The SMTs must also make sure that teachers are dedicated professionals and are good role models at all times to the learners. Teachers should always guarantee that learners are actively engaged in learning through the use of group work, discussions, investigations, asking questions, and other innovative teaching methodologies to cultivate creative and reflective thinking skills.

Education should make learners self-reliant and competent. There is need to shift from teacher centred to learner centred approaches to teaching as well as a shift from teaching to learning to enhance thinking and reflection among learners and to use learners' prior knowledge and experiences. Teachers also need to shift from content based curriculum to competence-based curriculum. In education competence can be defined as a complex set of behaviours built on to the components of knowledge and skills. Subject related competence refers to a deeper understanding of the subject and finding an answer to the question. Teaching for competences requires critical teaching where educators help learners find alternative ways of solving problems and looking at issues from different perspectives. Teachers should encourage learners to ask critical questions and also to deconstruct and construct knowledge. Learning tasks should involve a combination of learning activities like analysis of case studies, working on given prob-

lems, doing experiments and various hands-on activities which will enhance thinking among the learners.

Competence-based assessment should help learners develop the capacity of being able to act, now and in the future, and to assume responsibility for their actions. A competence is more than just knowledge or skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. There should be a combination of practical, foundational and reflexive competencies, that is, applied competence. Competency can be practical, that is, learners should demonstrate that they can do something. Competency can also be foundational, that is, when learners show that they know what and why they are doing it in that particular way and not otherwise. On the other hand, competency can be reflective, that is, when learners show that they can reflect in-and-on their actions and are able to apply their practice and knowledge to new situations. Some of the common reading strategies employed by teachers are pre-reading, while reading and post reading that is, helping learners before, during and after reading.

Teachers should employ various strategies which will assist learners to be competent in what they are learning. Education should respond to societal needs, advances in technology and globalisation. Teaching and learning should help learners develop their abilities, motivation and desire to play an active role in finding solutions to problems and issues in the society. Teachers should have learning area/subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of content. It is imperative for teachers to have good communication skills, that is, communicating sensitively appropriate to learners' ages, levels of development, gender, race, as well as individual learning styles and needs. There is also a need for instructional practice, that is, teaching through diverse modes, including new technologies, making curricular content relevant to experiences of learners and management of classrooms.

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