

Teachers' Experiences with English as the Language of Learning and Teaching in the East London Education District

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ABSTRACT This study investigates the teachers' experiences with English as the language of learning and teaching of isiXhosa learners. It critically examines the teachers' practices and experiences towards English as the sole language of learning and teaching (LoLT) at two primary schools in the East London District of South Africa. The study is guided by the fact that most learners use their mother tongue (isiXhosa) in classrooms as well as outside classrooms. Theoretically, this study is underpinned by the constructivist view of language learning and English as an international language. The study makes use of the qualitative research method with a case study design. The data collected was analyzed using discourse analysis. The findings suggest some instrumental motivations to use English as LoLT. Some of these motivations include studying abroad, business with foreign investors, and integrative motivations as the learners might be able to communicate with people from different countries.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multilingual country with eleven official languages, out of which nine are indigenous languages and the two former colonial languages (English and Afrikaans) (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996). In the Eastern Cape Province where this study is conducted, the main language, isiXhosa, is the home language of 83.8 percent of the population and English speakers are 3.7 percent (Probyn et al. 2002). Research confirms that African learners use their home language at home and in the communities (Strauss 1999:22; PANSALB 2000; Probyn et al. 2002; Mkohlwa 2015) and demographics suggest that they would have little direct contact with home language English speakers. Thus, this study seeks to investigate teachers' experiences with English as language of teaching and learning on English first additional language (FAL) learners, specifically isiXhosa speaking learners.

The new language in education policy (LiEP) of 1997 (Department of Education 1997) obliges each school to decide their own language policy in terms of the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and languages to be taught as subjects. In this regard, learners have to learn at least two official languages as subjects, and one of these languages should be the LoLT. School language policies should promote 'additive bilingualism' defined as maintaining home languages while providing access to the effective acquisition of additional languages. However, although the LiEP encourages the use of the learn-

ers' home languages as LoLT, it appears from several studies (Probyn et al. 2002; Vinjevold 1996) that the trend in townships and rural schools has not only been towards retaining English as LoLT, but introducing it even earlier than before either to implement the switch to English in line with the beginning of the Intermediate Phase in the new curriculum (grade 4) or to start with English as LoLT from grade 1 (Mkohlwa 2015).

The vision of the African National Congress (ANC) government of promoting all eleven languages is just a symbolic gesture and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future (Tshotsho 2013). The South African government has not yet provided the human resources needed to promote multilingualism. Practically, English and Afrikaans still have a higher status to other languages. The value attached to these languages even by blacks themselves, undermines the survival of African languages. There is evidence that many black South Africans make English their language of choice as a medium of instruction (Dyers 2001; De Klerk 2000; Banda 2004; Dyers and Abongdia 2014).

According to Pandor (2005), English was going to be 'optional' as a language of learning and teaching, but in the same breath she contradicted this position by saying that English was going to remain the language of education until other languages were sufficiently developed. De Klerk (2005) argues that the official recognition of English as a language of government and business confirms the power and value attached to English as the lingua franca at

government level. In spite of the government policy of multilingualism, English and Afrikaans remain the only two languages used in tertiary institutions. Therefore, it is evident that the functional value of English as the medium of instruction is endorsed and learners are obliged to adhere to English in order to progress at the tertiary level (Tshotsho 2013).

Research has revealed that language and achievement are closely linked and the use of English language as a LoLT in South Africa contributes a great deal to the high failure and drop-out rates among black learners (Barry 1999; Heugh 2005). According to Tshotsho (2013), the preference for English undermines the policy of the government to promote equal opportunities in the South African context. The black learners do not have support structures to develop their English language related skills thus, putting them at a disadvantage. The most disadvantaged group is the black learners from rural areas where they have limited English language proficiency and lack exposure to English mother tongue speakers, television and radio, often experienced by urban learners.

Research conducted in Witwatersrand (Doramsay 2012:1) reported, "Millions of South Africans do not complete their schooling partly because they are taught and assessed through the medium of English or Afrikaans and have no access to concepts in a language that they fully understand". Doramsay (2012) showed that most School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in South Africa through democratic processes as enriched in the Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 Sec. 29 (1), National Education Policy Act, Act 27 of 1996 and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, Sec (6) (2), opted for English as the MOI without any consideration as to whether considering their learners were able to learn effectively through the English medium (Yan 2003:1). These decisions appear to be justified in terms of the need for English language skills for either local or international career advancement (Witwatersrand 2003:3), which is why English is generally regarded internationally as the "power language" of commerce, industry and education. Ramphele (2009) argued that despite the lack of qualified teachers, the learners avoided studying indigenous languages at tertiary level because they feared that these qualifications would not lead to job opportunities.

It is evidenced by the fact that eighty percent of the poor young citizens of South Africa are failing under the Outcomes Based Education system (Ramphele 2009:19; Smook 2008). Gambu (2009) also noted that the causes of the poor results would not be determined without proper investigation. Curriculum failure according to research has been attributed to many different factors, such as,

- ♦ Outcomes Based Education (Gambu 1999; Smook 2008)
- ♦ Teacher Competence (Dorasamy 2005; Msimango 2008)
- ♦ Infrastructure and Resources (Godden 1996; Msimango 2008)
- ♦ Administration (Godden 1996; Msimango 2008)
- ♦ English as MoI (EMIS and Research Strategy Policy Development 2005)

The LoLT is regarded as a key factor in academic performance because concepts are grasped and articulated by means of a language. Asikhia (2010:230) defined academic performance as "performance of a learner which is adjusted by the examinee and some other significant as falling below an expected standard". According to Doramsay (2005), curriculum strategies are dependent on curriculum effectiveness, and the curriculum can be effective only if appropriately interacting with teachers' competence to facilitate learners' and teachers' performance. As indicated above, the key factors that influence curriculum effectiveness in South Africa is the teachers and learners subject to content knowledge, which happens to be facilitated through a language used as LoLT.

According to Abongdia (2013:50), the globalization of English has resulted in "forms of linguistic beliefs and practices that accent the socio-political dimensions of language variation" and "is rooted in contexts of social injustice". As a result, the socio-political situation of the different African countries plays a great role in the beliefs they hold about languages. To Abongdia, English has achieved a dominant position in the world as the global lingua franca and the language of economic and political activities. Allmann (2009:29) sees English as a "permanent element of developing Africa" despite its different dialects.

In South Africa, teachers who are not native speakers of English, teach the language in schools. Therefore, the English proficiency ac-

quired by learners is in fact at a second language acquisition level. Alexander (2000:11-12) argues that in order to support an education system based on LoLT, a teaching corps of native English speaking or proficient second language speakers of the global language is needed. It means that learners who are not taught by teachers proficient in English might not have the necessary foundation on which to build English language skills. Alexander (2000:10) is therefore of the opinion that if learners from their first school year are taught in English by teachers not proficient in English, they will have problems in reading and writing either in the home language or the language of teaching.

Statement of the Problem

The researchers' observation is that English, which is a language of learning and teaching (LoLT), is not used to the fullest in some schools in Buffalo City. The common thing among learners is the use of the mother tongue isiXhosa in classrooms as well as outside classroom contexts. Some teachers use their home language when teaching content subjects in addition to English, but learners are expected to answer the test and examination questions in English (Maphalala 1988). Some educators resort to code switching in trying to clarify some of the concepts and continue teaching in isiXhosa. The other problem is that most learners in some black South African schools are from disadvantaged school backgrounds where there are no libraries and they are not exposed to reading (Banda 2007). Furthermore, English is not used in their homes, and most of them are not exposed to television and newspapers, which can help increase their English vocabulary (Dyers 2008). Also, most of the learners are only exposed to English when they are at school and finally, learners have a deficiency in English and demonstrate weak knowledge of the language, resulting in many errors in sentence construction and communication in this language.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is extracted from Mkohlwa's master's thesis and it adopted a qualitative case study research method. The study is underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, which puts emphasis on the construction of knowledge

through observable phenomena. This paradigm takes into account how people understand and make meanings of different situations by describing their intentions, beliefs, values and reasons (De Vos et al. 2005; Henning et al. 2004; Babbie and Mouton 2003). It is a case study research, which focuses on a single group or unit, namely, two primary schools in the East London education district. It focuses on a small sample of six participants, which allowed the researchers to use in-depth investigation into a specific and relatively small area of interest. Hence, the researchers focused on two primary schools, making use of six teachers, with three from each school. These teachers teach mathematics, natural sciences and social sciences and they used English as a LoLT. The data was thus collected through the use of semi-structured interviews and observations.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study discussed the following issues to strengthen its research perspective: the problem of objectivity, rejection of objectivity, reinforcing constructivist research, "retelling as a way of experiencing the experience (Sivasubramaniam 2004: 356), and a rationale for the discussion of findings.

Subjectivity and Objectivity

For the purpose of this paper, the researchers found it imperative to look at objectivity and subjectivity though they are complexly connected. It is evident that the potential for objectivity depends on the subject-researcher interaction. Despite the fact that subjectivity and objectivity are involved at the two levels, the difference is critical. Based on this, Sivasubramaniam argues that the term 'objectivity', as it is understood, is a set of characteristics that represent experience or knowledge, which is independent from any one individual. This independence is an outcome of stating a set of rules and the permissible operations that are needed to activate them. Knowledge that is derived as a result of such activation is not influenced by personal feelings or opinions, but only by facts. As this knowledge is seen to exist outside the mind, many researchers tend to think that it is objective and it can therefore be proved (Sivasubramaniam 2004: 356).

Experiences of Teachers in Using English as a Language of Learning and Teaching

The reason for this investigation was to see the teachers' experiences in using English as the LoLT in isiXhosa speaking learners by isiXhosa speaking teachers since learners seem to experience difficulties in expressing themselves in English (Mkohlwa 2015). As mentioned earlier, there are some teachers who still rely heavily on code switching or code mixing when teaching and some schools still lack resources. Others justified their teaching practices concerning code mixing and as a result resorted to their own ways of teaching using English as a LoLT.

Language Preferred by Teachers

The study solicited information on the views of the teachers on the use of English as a LoLT in the schools under study as language is a means of communication. In this context, English is the first additional language, the dominant language from an international perspective, occupying first place (Webb and Kembo-sure 2000:27, Dyers and Abongdia 2014) and is therefore the language of everyday use in public places. However, there were teachers who believed to be pleased in expressing themselves clearly in isiXhosa to the learners. The findings of the study through observations and interviews were that the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) was not used by the teachers most of the time, though they claimed to be comfortable with expressing themselves in English to the learners. IsiXhosa was used most of the time to clarify certain aspects so that learning was easier. According to Otaale (2005:121), one of the prerequisites for successful teaching is good communication between the learners and the teacher. The LoLT must help the learners understand the lesson presentation. It was realized that a majority of the teachers appeared to prefer to express themselves in English because it is the official LoLT and perhaps because in South Africa, English is seen as a gateway to a good education and social advance (Abongdia 2013; Dyers and Abongdia 2014). However, this is not justifiable because in the study done by Probyn (2001), teachers reported that their learners experienced a lot of difficulties with English.

Language Policy and Use of English as LoLT

In response to one of the interview questions, the participants argued that English as a LoLT should be introduced in grade R. They believed that learners are more eager to learn when they are young. In view of this, learning English at an early stage and age can render learners more fluent and able to understand the language better as they progress. There was evidence that learners should master the language at an early stage so that when they start content subjects from senior grades, they can then master the subjects well. However, some participants suggested that the policymakers must simplify the language for the learners. Otaala (2005:127) advocates that if pupils are exposed to a foreign language as the LoLT from the time they start school, they are not exposed to the psychological shock of a change of LoLT at a later stage. Finally, policymakers should consider the origin or the background of learners especially those from rural areas (Mkohlwa 2015).

Benefits of English as a LoLT

Learning through English opens doors to wider knowledge acquisition (Moyo 2001; Abongdia 2009). The study revealed that English is used globally. It gives learners opportunities to qualify for sponsors and learn abroad. The study also noted that English is a unifying language as learners may be able to communicate with other nations. The findings of the study showed that the main advantage of using English as LoLT is that if the learners were to travel abroad, especially for work and studies, they would be able to communicate with people from different countries. This finding is supported by Benjamin (2004) who thinks that those learners are satisfied with English as LoLT among other reasons, because English is an international language and it helps them communicate with people from different backgrounds. In line with this finding, Moyo (2001: 104) argues that South Africa needs English in order to be able to communicate with the rest of Africa and the world. The present study concurs with research conducted by Abongdia (2013), which revealed that English is the language or lingua franca in the global village for jobs, education, business and even politics. Hence, she holds that there is a huge demand for the study of English in most

countries with an ideological viewpoint held by many as a strong motivation for learning English, the language of globalization. This is because globalization has an effect on national languages as it promotes "the increasing power of various languages that are already established as the languages of wider communication" (Abongdia 2013:50).

Learning through English

The study further revealed that English as LoLT is the reason why there is such a high failure rate. According to the teachers, learners think and say that English is difficult. It also appeared that learners do not use English at their homes and are not free to speak it even when given a chance to do so in class. However, some teachers believed that learners could cope with English as LoLT. They felt that learners understand what the teacher is saying but have difficulties in expressing themselves as well. This study showed that learners are trying but they need to be assisted by using both isiXhosa and English. As earlier mentioned, teachers code switched or used both isiXhosa and English during teaching and learning so that learners could understand the content. Learners kept quiet when they were asked explanatory questions in English, meaning that learners struggled to learn through English (Abongdia 2013). Furthermore, the findings of this study also revealed that if learners are to cope with English as a LoLT, English should be used very often and teachers should ensure that they adjust their English use to match that of their learners. These findings are also supported by Nel's (2005:151) and Dyers and Abongdia's (2014) argument that many learners in South Africa (especially in rural areas) are hardly exposed to English outside the classroom.

The findings further showed that lack of good language skills in the LoLT led to learners' failure because of their inability to cope with the curriculum. The teachers that were interviewed were of the opinion that learners' poor proficiency in English contributes to the poor academic performance. The teachers reported that the learners do not understand explanations given in English, have a problem answering questions and following instructions in English, and lack general understanding of English which reinforces rote learning and later led to a high fail-

ure rate. Cooke and Williams (2002:313) support these findings that "education is unlikely to be effective for the majority when schools employ an unfamiliar language such as English as LOLT without effective means for increasing learners' language proficiency". Furthermore, De Wet (2002) indicates that in South Africa, poor English proficiency almost always lead to poor performance. In view of this, the study suggests that there is a great need to improve and guide the English proficiency of learners so that they can perform better in school.

Finally, this study has also shown that teachers believe that English, as a LoLT does not only negatively influence the academic performance of learners, but also has an influence on the future of learners in terms of furthering their studies. Learners, who do not pass English as a subject at high school level, are not easily accepted in the universities and other tertiary institutions abroad.

Use of isiXhosa as a LoLT

In response to another interview question, it was revealed that isiXhosa should not be a default LoLT, teachers felt that using isiXhosa may create problems for the learners given that the world is using English as a lingua franca and language of technological advancement. They also mentioned that translating from English to isiXhosa might be costly to the country for the textbooks and other materials. Given that most of the teaching materials are in English, using isiXhosa might make things even more difficult as proper translation from English to isiXhosa is needed and may of course be very expensive. Despite the above view, some of the teachers opined that using isiXhosa to isiXhosa speaking learners, as a LoLT would be fair. They felt that explanations provided in one's mother tongue would be less costly for the learner as this would eliminate the learner's need to first translate the second languages into the mother tongue in order to understand the concept being explained. Finally using isiXhosa as a LoLT may then enable learners to answer questions in order to show their understanding of the content (Mkohlwa 2015). This resulted in some teachers' beliefs that using isiXhosa as a LoLT can make a difference in the learners' academic or learning performance. This also means that learners are able to receive help with their homework from their parents or guardians.

As discussed above, learners can learn meaningfully through the language they know well, which in this case is their mother tongue. That is, a learner's mother tongue is a vehicle of knowledge construction. Supporting this finding, Brock-Utne (2004:60) refers to the English medium of instruction as a language of "destruction" (instead of construction) because it blocks the learners' potential in attaining the intended outcomes of the notion of "knowledge". Many studies related to the use of learners' mother tongue in teaching all point to better academic performance at school (Galabawa and Lwaitama 2005; Langenhoven 2005; Malekela 2003, 2004; Mwinsheikhe 2003). There is therefore evidence of better learning taking place in the use of mother tongue. Foreign language(s) as language(s) of instruction on the other hand, seem to be barrier(s) to children's learning. Many scholars have found that learning in a foreign language (English) prevents learners' from easily accessing knowledge (Brock-Utne 2005; Senkoro 2004; Mwinsheikhe 2003). The observations by the scholars mentioned above were made in Tanzania where English is supposed to be the medium of instruction in secondary schools. Mwinsheikhe (2003) in particular observed that English was not only a barrier to learning in general, but also it conceptualized science knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that teachers have different experiences with using English as the LoLT among isiXhosa speakers. Although the participants admitted that the learners struggled with English, some of them still argued that it is the best language to be used given its instrumental strength. Furthermore, English is an international language and a tool to communicate with other people abroad. On the other hand, some of the participants posited that the use of the learners' home language is better as it facilitates better learning than the use of a foreign language. Despite English being the LoLT, learners as well as their teachers were experiencing problems in expressing themselves through this medium. English proficiency was sighted as one of the major problems, thus leading to poor academic performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that English should be in use as LoLT from grade R, rather than grade

four as is the case. This is for early exposure and to enable the learners to get used to the language so that by the time they finish grade 12, they would have a better command over English that can allow them to comprehend the content subjects. Secondly, academic performance needs some little shake up in the form of motivation because many other countries in the same situation like South Africa are doing well. In view of this, the study recommends that intensive research be carried out to identify other possible factors that might be contributing to poor academic performance.

Thirdly, the government needs to make available resources that can ease the learning of foreign languages. It is difficult for these learners to develop in the absence of resources like textbooks and decent libraries, as reading and writing is the only next option for foreign language learning.

Lastly, the educators, education officials, SMTs, SGBs, parents and the wider community need to find a way to build the confidence of these learners instead of playing the game, which is seen as the best way to shift blames.

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