

## Learners' Experiences of Writing in English First Additional Language

Jane-Francis A. Abongdia and Thandiswa Mpiti

*University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa*

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**ABSTRACT** Children's literacy skill is a very important issue in the world in general and South Africa in particular. The issue is more complex in South Africa as learners are immersed in a second language (L2) learning. South Africa is fronted with the challenge of successfully furnishing a bulk of its populace with a second language, in this case English. There is, however, insufficient literature that looks into writing experiences of isiXhosa and Afrikaans background learners in English First Additional Language (EFAL). Hence, this study investigates the learners' experiences of writing in English First Additional Language. The theoretical and conceptual framework for the study is provided by studies on constructivist theories and socio-cultural theories. In exploring these issues, a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis was adopted. This data is analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA).

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of achieving significant access to good education, business and international interaction has necessitated the learning of a second language by most countries and in this case English. Moreover, the central goal of English education around the globe is to develop writing and communicative abilities of English Second Language (ESL) learners so that they might better navigate higher education (Parsons and Beauchamp 2012). Nevertheless, the degree of English language proficiency is not pleasing especially with unachievable objectives.

A brief description of language use in South Africa is necessary in order to give a broader picture of how the present study was conceived. South Africa is a developing nation with most of the population speaking local languages as their home language. English is mostly used in urban areas, especially in city centers for economic purposes. This kind of situation is influenced by the fact that many businesses are still owned by White people who are either English or Afrikaans speakers. But for people living in the rural areas, exposure to English is limited because the majority of people communicate with each other in local languages.

In the context of this study, the learners reside in Eastern Cape Province, East London in the Colored area, township and rural areas where communication occurs mostly in isiXhosa and Afrikaans. East London is surrounded by villages, farm areas and townships with informal set-

tlements and vast rural areas. The schools where the research is conducted are also located in isiXhosa and Afrikaans-speaking communities with the educators and learners facing a challenge of limited exposure to English in their communities. However, some of those who live in the Colored area are exposed in both English and Afrikaans. The inadequate exposure to English as well as support from home results to the learners struggling to comprehend subjects communicated through the English medium hence, resulting in poor academic performance (McKay and Chick 2001; Heugh 2003).

Moreover, parents cannot check their children's exercise books, or help them with their homework because they are illiterate. Some who have older siblings with illiterate parents are assisted by them. When they start schooling, it takes a longer time for some to adapt to this learning environment and some of these learners start school when they are older. They do not have sufficient time in the classroom resulting in limited acquisition of beginning level English language proficiency, which permits them to participate successfully with learning in English. In the light of the above brief background, the aim of this study is to examine Grade 6 isiXhosa and Afrikaans first language speakers' experiences of writing in English as a First Additional Language (FAL) and how they could be managed.

In view of the above, it is worth looking at the findings of the 2011, 2012 and 2013 Annual National Assessment (ANA) results of English

FAL paper written by Grade 6 learners. The national average performance in English FAL by Grade 6 learners was thirty-six percent and in 2013 it was forty-six percent. Looking back to 2011, results were dismal. Grade 6 learners' national average performance was twenty-eight percent and thirty percent of learners achieved above thirty-five percent in English FAL. In terms of CAPS, at least a fifty percent mark is required for adequate and higher achievement in English. These findings revealed that South African school children in grades 4 to 6 and 9 do not understand simple English and are significantly inadequate in writing meaningful and correctly punctuated sentences. Hence, learners find themselves battling with academic progress through education and training. In spite of the above situation, the government aspires to elevate pass rates on literacy tests from the current average of thirty-five to forty percent to a minimum of sixty percent in 2014 (Abongdia and Mpiti 2014).

It is worth mentioning that the above description indicates a problem and this has been a concern for the education department, language educators and researchers. Several studies have been carried out to find solutions to this problem but the problem still exists. Thus, the researchers deemed it necessary to examine this problem and to come up with possible suggestions to promote the learners' writing skills in English FAL. In the context of this study, it is important to prepare all the learners for the future by providing them with quality education.

### **Aim**

The paper seeks to investigate the experiences of learners in writing English FAL. It further aims to explore the causes of the difficulties and how to address the problem.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Theoretically, the paper examines the notion of writing and writing proficiency. Researchers on writing have observed that many second language learners face a lot of difficulties in writing. In a study conducted in Bangladesh with English language students, Choudhury (2001) indicated that students could not successfully communicate at a satisfactory level of English proficiency even after 12 years of English education. Others in their comparison of English

test grades and Secondary School Certificate English grades at the high school level, remarked on "an alarming rate of failure of rural students in English" (Hamid and Baldauf 2008:21.) English language learners (ELL) require additional time to acclimate to school routines and expectations in the United States (Chiswick and Miller 2002; Short and Fitzsimmons 2007). As much as ELL may be growing in numbers in America, their English abilities are not however well established to permit success in an English language classroom without additional support (Batalova et al. 2007). Moreover, studies carried out by Richmond et al. (2008) indicate that the majority of people across the world have little or no access to written communication through literacy.

Based on the above, there is literacy development taking place the world over but the challenges remain huge. There is an increasing consciousness for people in education to continually improve and assess programs in harmony with altering situations (Richmond et al. 2008). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has established the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) framework, which accelerates progress in making action on literacy more effective and taking it to scale to reach the large illiterate population (De Klerk 2002; Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015). In spite of these efforts, the problem still exists. A study conducted by Moja (2000) showed a drop in the quality of the education system in Nigeria, resulting in a negative effect on literacy development in primary school learners. The findings also indicated that low morale of teachers, the poor quality of teachers, and lack of satisfactory professional provision for teachers in the organization has an adverse effect on literacy development. Hence, Olusoji (2012) stated that the common problem in learning English in Nigeria is that many of the English teachers are unskilled resulting in incompetent teaching.

On the other hand, Okech (2005) conducted a case study of literacy education in Uganda. Findings revealed that there is a very poor performance in literacy at the sixth year of primary education. Implementing the primary program by teachers who struggle with reading and writing English used as the medium of instruction is a big problem in Uganda (Kagoda 2012). Kagoda (2012) further stated that this entails teachers cannot express themselves as no can write cor-

rect English for their pupils. Hence, something needs to be done to bring about development in literacy acquisition in primary schools as well as in adult literacy provision (Okech 2005).

Another study conducted was by Pearce (2009) on the literacy challenge in eleven West African countries. The findings indicated that more than forty percent of the population is unable to read and write. The findings also revealed that the low literacy level is determined by difficulties in the official school structure and the absence of learning situations. Pearce (2009) further holds that the quality of education is also poor due to that the lack of trained teachers and literacy facilitators.

However, the issue is more complex in South Africa as learners are immersed in the use of a second language (L2) as the language of learning and teaching. South Africa is faced with the challenge of successfully equipping most of its populace with a second language. In this case, English. The birth of democracy in South Africa in 1994 meant that many changes had to be implemented in various spheres (education, health, justice) of the government in order to redress the imbalances of the apartheid government. As a result, in 1996 the South African Constitution acknowledged the richness of language diversity in the country. It adopted a liberal constitution with 11 official languages. This language policy encourages (but does not mandate) the usage of African languages together with English, but maintaining the learners' home languages as they learn an additional language (Probyn et al. 2002; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004; Abongdia 2015).

With this transition, the government also adopted a very liberal Language in Education Policy (LiEP 1997), which decentralizes the decision on the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in the different schools (through the School Governing Bodies) (Probyn et al. 2002; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004; Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015). Most schools, however, have not adapted the suggestions of LiEP, and have continued with the use of English as the LoLT from at least Grade 4 (Casale and Posel 2011; Abongdia 2015). The South African National Curriculum Statement (CAPS) (DoE 2002) specified that one should achieve proficiency in the designated LoLT at an essential level for effective learning of the program.

Moreover, the CAPS document also prescribed that the teaching of English as a subject should be introduced from Grade 1 in all schools (Department of Basic Education 2011). Consequently, all schools should have some English being taught from the first grade, but for some schools, English is also the language of instruction from Grade 1. Proponents of Mother Tongue (MT) education argue that a later transition to English is necessary given that children cannot understand the language of instruction (Brock-Utne 2007; Banda 2009; Abongdia 2015; Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015). Mallozzi and Malloy (2007) highlighted the significance of African home language speaking South Africans to learn English as a second language as English governs the workforce as well as school instruction. For these reasons, proponents of bilingual transitional models predict that not only will a later transition to English benefit a child's First Language proficiency, but it will also lead to better proficiency in English in the long run (Van Weijen et al. 2009; Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015).

## METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that analyzes the learners' experiences of writing in English as a First Additional Language (FAL). Being a case study, the sample size comprised of grade 6 learners from two primary schools purposively selected in the East London District in the Eastern Cape Province, in South Africa. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, observations and analysis of learners' writings (exercise books and tasks). The schools and participants were carefully chosen to reflect the general writing experiences of all the learners. Since the researchers used the qualitative research design, they decided to use learners from the different linguistic backgrounds: isiXhosa and Afrikaans with the same socioeconomic backgrounds to find their writing experiences

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the general language proficiency of isiXhosa background learners have a smaller vocabulary than Afrikaans background learners in EFAL. This was as a result of the fact that some of the Afrikaans background learners are exposed to English at home (Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015). However, both

isiXhosa and Afrikaans background learners experience difficulties in English language learning. These difficulties included the four language skills that are listening speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, isiXhosa and Afrikaans background learners kept making mistakes in syntax, semantics, morphology, pronunciation and spelling. The reasons underlining these writing difficulties are many: English is not their home language, the lack of the target language exposure, the learners' inclination towards using home language in the classroom rather than English and the absence and weakness of input in their language teaching context (Abongdia 2015; Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015).

Nonetheless, the learners' writing samples showed that both groups of learners face more difficulty in organization, capitalization, vocabulary and grammar, insufficient use of punctuation marks and inexplicitness or fuzziness. The effect is more serious than the other problem because the anticipated meaning is often misunderstood (Banda 2009; Abongdia 2015). Significantly, the fact is that these serious challenges come as a result of poor pedagogy. It is however important to say that teachers cannot single-handedly manage this problem nor can it be resolved from outside the school system. Hence, the researchers argue that it is a joint battle and every one, including teachers, parents, education department and even the learners must take active roles towards the development of writing especially in an additional language (Mallozzi and Malloy 2007; Van Weijen et al. 2009; Mkohlwa and Abongdia 2015) as it is the case with English in these schools.

Moreover, their understanding of acquisition of literacy skills relied heavily on their home language as has been indicated above. Hence, the issue of pronunciation and learners' reliance on their mother tongue seems to be a problem that they experience. In both schools observing these learners, the researchers noticed that their pronunciation was problematic and it affected the way they wrote English words. Because they pronounced words incorrectly, this was evident in their writing. This resulted in them using isiXhosa and Afrikaans writing rules when writing English words. For example, the Department of Education states that English vowels are predominantly problematic for non-English speakers and this is made even worse by the variety of

ways in which these vowels are spelt (DoE 2008c).

Regarding the writing skill, it was realized that some of the learners in both schools could not write even short sentences let alone short paragraphs. This could be attributed to the method and style of teaching used by the teachers.

Another major cause was the lack of exposure as well as support from parents and siblings. According to Banda (2009), older siblings play a significant role in school literacy development among bilingual children. Thus, teachers can use senior students with the same linguistic background as tutors so that they can help as mediators to the new language and the new culture for the younger students.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigates the writing experiences of teachers and learners in two primary schools in the East London district in South Africa. The investigation revealed that emerging developing writers need a teacher who has a plan or process map on how to introduce learners to English writing rules. English FAL should be in classes where learners' writing development is monitored. Moreover, for isiXhosa background learners, their language has a transparent (regular or shallow) orthography whereas English has an opaque (irregular or deep) orthography. Learners bring this knowledge to learning to write in English, but they have to learn that the sound (or phoneme-grapheme) relationships are not exactly the same in English as in isiXhosa.

This therefore needs to be socialized into the rules of an opaque orthography of the language. Writing should not happen haphazardly in content where the sounds made by letters change in different words. Simple grammar rules may be helpful to learners to identify their mistakes coming from overgeneralization. In short, the ability to communicate cannot be satisfied if "the grammar" remains the problem of the writer. Furthermore, the researchers hold that writing is one of the most challenging and frustrating language areas to teach especially for a non-English speaker. This maybe as a result of the fact that to develop the essential abilities to improve learners' writing demands a lot of hard work.

In view of the analysis above, one may say that the learners' writing problems are systemat-

ic and classifiable. Therefore, learners must see these difficulties as the key to comprehend and resolve problems in English writing courses.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Monitoring the learners' writing development is a very important issue raised. However, the researchers recommend teachers should be properly trained and lessons properly planned in order not to get the learners confused. Given that English has an opaque (irregular or deep) orthography, there is a great need to have teachers who understand the rules of the language to teach it especially to FAL learners.

In addition, the researchers noticed that learners who were struggling with English writing were not scaffold enough. Thus, teachers should assist students to learn to cope with foreign as well as make the learning context less frustrating. It is also fundamental that teachers take into cognizance learners' difficulties and prepare their lessons such that they are accommodated and assisted.

English second language teachers should also endeavor to implement, amend and develop educative programs to minimize the learners' problems and raise their academic achievement. This could be done through the use of a more constructive teaching method that involves cooperative learning. For this to happen, there is a great need for teachers to diversify their teaching methods following the needs and abilities to the learners'.

This study also suggests that teachers should be given so in the form of an in-service training to assist them with new teaching methods in the field of language teaching especially as a social practice. Taking in to consideration the educational and cultural backgrounds of the learners, teachers may develop more ways to handle the identified problems in a professional manner. To improve the teaching of writing, the English Language teachers should adopt the following activities for improving the competence of their Grade 6 learners in mastering the writing skills.

- ♦ Practice in writing skills is necessary.
- ♦ Training learners to provide feedback to their peers as feedback is essential and helps both the givers and the receivers. For example, teachers have to encourage the learners' to work together as much as possible, through group work and pair work.

- ♦ Making use of the approaches universally used to teach writing, for example, the process approach, which is based on the research into the strategies writers apply when they compose a piece of writing. On the other hand the process-genre approach, which has empirically been proved to be effective. It is built on the notion that learner writers may benefit from studying different types of written texts.
- ♦ Varying teaching and learning techniques and procedures to keep learners stay motivated to learn and to meet their different needs and learning preferences.
- ♦ Assigning tasks at different levels of difficulty to suit the learners' different abilities
- ♦ Language activities should be meaningful to learners and relate to their real lives.
- ♦ The integration between writing and other skills and sub-skills such as grammar and vocabulary is essential.

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