

Learning to Teach through Mother Tongue: PGCE Student's Experiences in one South African University

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a case study of students who obtained their basic education from previously advantaged schools (ex-model C). They were enrolled for Post Graduate Certificate in Education in one South African University. The focus of the study was to understand their experiences of learning to teach Life Skills through mother tongue (isiZulu). This qualitative study was located within the interpretive paradigm. Using purposive sampling, two students were identified. Data was generated through students' narratives. Students were asked to write about their experiences of learning to teach through isiZulu. Data was analysed and the results revealed that both students appreciated the initiative, however they lacked confidence and competence in the use of isiZulu as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). The study concluded that students who do not have adequate background of isiZulu as a LoLT should be dissuaded from taking this module or should be given extra support to enable them to reach the required levels of competence.

INTRODUCTION

Current research suggests that Foundation Phase (FP) learners entering school are able to learn best through their Mother Tongue (MT), and that a First Additional Language (FAL) is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of MT as Alexander (2009) affirms. As a result teachers who teach these children should be trained to teach FP learners in mother tongue. Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education (LPFSAHE) stresses the need to transform and promote the use of African languages (Council on Higher Education 2001). Higher Education institutions have responded to the call made by LPFSAHE by revising their language policies to accommodate African languages and their use as academic languages. One South African university has revised its language policy such that it promotes the use of isiZulu as LoLT in selected modules and this was approved by its Council in 2006.

The birth of democracy in South Africa brought some changes in the education system. Some changes stem from the constitution of the country which guarantees learners the right to receive education in the language of their choice. The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 gives parents the right to choose the language of learning and teaching (SASA 1996). The Constitution gave rise to the change in educa-

tion language policies, at both, school and higher education levels. At the school level, the Language in Education Policy that was passed in 1997 suggest that an additive bilingual approach be used in the Foundation Phase where the learners' home language is maintained while the First Additional language (FAL) is being introduced as a subject until grade four where the FAL becomes the medium of instruction (Department of Education 1997).

As the result, the Faculty of Education developed Foundation Phase specialization modules (Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills) and were offered in isiZulu as of 2008. When entering the specialization, students' background of the language is not taken into account. As long as students' home language is isiZulu, it is taken for granted that they know the language and hence can learn through it with ease.

This study explores how two teacher education students enrolled in the PGCE experienced the use of isiZulu as a LoLT. These students came from schools where isiZulu was either offered as a FAL or not offered at all.

Studies on Experiences on Mother Tongue Teaching

Mother tongue teaching / education can be defined simply as the use of the mother tongue in formal education as the medium of instruc-

tion (SIL International 1999). There has been lively debate around this topic, as Ferreira (2014) cites Gabrielatos (2001) who calls mother tongue a 'bone of contention' and Prodromou (2000:6) who refers to it as a 'skeleton in the closet'. These debates have brought about new and different outlooks on the role of the mother tongue and the way people perceive it. Moodley (2009) reports on De Klerk the former president of South Africa, describing debates about language in education as fraught with controversy and opposing views. These different perceptions are perpetuated by the hegemony of the English language. Moreover, colonialism deposited a series of viewpoints, attitudes and perceptions about English (Neke 2005) and mother tongue teaching. Alexander (2009) asserts that people do not believe that their home language can ever become as developed as English or Afrikaans. Even during the democratic dispensation people still do not think African languages can be used as academic languages. In some cases such perceptions are perpetrated by financial constraints attached to mother tongue teaching as Woldermariam (2007) maintains. Where in higher education there is a serious lack of resources to teach in these languages.

In some international countries, mother tongue teaching is a taken for granted part of teaching and learning because to them it is a norm. Therefore, in such contexts, all students are competent in the use of their mother tongue. Research has shown that students who are proficient in their mother tongue are better equipped to learn other languages and it is apparent that countries that used mother tongue as medium of instruction are better in augmenting and creating knowledge (Ejaz 2001). He gives examples of East Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea and parts of India, where mother tongues have played a serious role, highlighting that they are much better off than North India (including Pakistan). Ebrahim (2009) states that non-English mother tongue speakers in English medium schools are taught and assessed in English as a home language curriculum and if they do not do well, they are perceived as remedial children. According to Young (2008), "The use of Chinese as the medium of instruction could enhance students' self-learning, ability and confidence, stimulate a higher order thinking, revive students' interest and motivation in learning, improve student-teacher relationship and activate

students' participation." This suggests that the practice of MT teaching eliminates the number of children who are labeled as remedial children.

Alexander (2009) asserts that children benefit from teachers who are well grounded in the language of instruction. Other studies maintain that through mother tongue teaching learners will gain insight into their language including cultural, social, linguistic and cognitive growth, (Ejeh 2004). Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) argues that learning through a foreign or second/ third language curtails the development of the children's capabilities, perpetuates poverty and can and does cause serious mental harm. It is therefore important to equip teachers with necessary skills to teach in the language of a learner. Students who perceive mother tongue teaching negatively need to be encouraged to understand the benefits of such practice. Therefore it is necessary to investigate their perceptions and experiences so that their standpoints are known.

In Tanzania, where education in primary schools is conducted in Kiswahili, studies by Roy-Campbell (1996) in Ndamba (2008) show that students favour the retention of English as a medium of instruction at secondary level. Ndamba (2008) supports Roy-Campbell (1996) who found that many Tanzanian students who said that English should be maintained as the medium of instruction could barely carry out a conversation in English with the researcher. Such sentiments expressed by students who could hardly communicate in English can only be attributed to attitudes. Roy-Campbell goes on to say that students do not value their mother tongue, hence they would prefer to learn using a language that they do not understand even when given the option to use their own language in learning (Ndamba 2008). In some case students favour the use of English not understanding how much they miss out a lot when learning through the language which is not their own. Learning in the language one understands better increases participation in class discussions as Young (2008) and Mashiya (2010) state. Not only does it increase participation in class discussions but as Hay (2009) asserts, the goal and measure of success for mother tongue education efforts is increased performance. Young (2008) further states that many people believe simplistically that using mother tongue would lead to a decline in English standards. A study conducted by Moodley (2009) showed that some

members of the university community prefer isiZulu usage for non-academic purpose on campus such as in socializing and religious events.

Ejeh (2004) conducted a study on attitudes of student teachers towards teaching in mother tongue in Nigerian primary schools. Findings indicate that students had a generally negative attitude towards the idea. He concludes that the legacy of colonialism is still influencing the way students perceive mother tongue and the attitudes they display towards it. It is in this vein that He'lot and Young (2005) argue that students should be taught to value mother tongue as a human resource rather than as economic one. However, Phillipson (2006) does not support mother tongue teaching in higher education. He maintains that teaching second language learners through the international language of English at university level ought not to pose a threat to other languages, as the students already have a thorough grasp of their mother-tongue. However this could be dangerous to some university students who have lower literacy levels of English.

Most researchers are in favour of mother tongue teaching even at higher education level. Iversen and Pollonais (2008) assert that most higher education students in Tanzania do not receive the education intended for them because of their extremely low proficiency in English which is the language of instruction. These students are said to lack creativity, are not inquisitive, that they seldom question things, instead, they tend to memorise and are timid (Iversen and Pollonais 2008). If these students were exposed to their own language the case would have been different. Al-Harbi (2010) is of the view that focusing on second language may result in students losing interest in mother tongue and having difficulties in translating second language into mother tongue.

In the South African context, most students who are isiZulu speaking who studied in former white schools have a shallow mother tongue vocabulary, they are so much used to English to an extent that even at home they converse in English, more especially those who live with educated parents or they code switch at the most. Chances of losing proper African words are vast in such situations.

Research Problem

Twelve African students were taken into isiZulu class. Two of them had very shallow knowl-

edge of isiZulu. They had little or no experience of learning through it. They could converse and battled to learn through it as they had studied in previously advantaged schools. At first, during the orientation programme students were skeptical about learning through isiZulu. After explaining the contents of the Language in Education Policy of 1997 that Foundation Phase learners are to be taught using the additive bilingual approach to them, they then accepted to go to the isiZulu class. What triggered interest to conduct such a study was that it was the first group coming from ex-model C schools (students who studied in previously advantaged schools) in the isiZulu class. Then they became the focal point. It is therefore against this background that this study sought to answer the following question:

- ♦ How do ex-model C PGCE (Foundation Phase) students experience Life Skills mother tongue teaching in Higher Education?

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The study purports to raise awareness on the difficulties some students may experience in higher education institutions who are implementing their language policies as initiatives in the democratic dispensation. Most institutions are using African languages for the first time so there are no recorded experiences of students as recipients of this undertaking. Such a study hoped to highlight the need for structured support to ensure that the teaching and learning process is not compromised.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's Theory of social constructivism underpins this study. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that knowledge is a social construct and we believe that this applies throughout life. In the context of this study, the process of learning was facilitated by participation in group activities. This affirms that the environments in which students learn have a great impact on their linguistic development. Similarly, Christie and Roskos (2009) affirm Vygotsky's beliefs that the potential for cognitive development depends on the social interactions one is involved in. As such we felt that the two students' linguistic competence would be influenced by the interactions

they found themselves in during the course of the module.

In order to construct knowledge one has to interpret their experiences. Knowledge is the result of experiences or perceptions. This theory was used to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of the two students. Reflections on the experiences of students about mother tongue teaching gave a clear picture of how students view mother tongue teaching in higher education. In this study students were required to share their experiences of learning through the medium of isiZulu. They defined the situation and attached their own meaning to it and hence their interpretation of the entire situation also featured in the way they defined the situation and gave meaning according to their own point of view.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This was a qualitative case study located within an interpretive paradigm. This paradigm is deemed relevant to this study because it is associated with human sciences where people's behaviours, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes are investigated as Cohen et al. (2007) state. Strauss and Corbin (1998) and McMillan and Schumacher (1993) regard qualitative research as any kind of research that produces findings that are delinked from statistical quantifications.

Study Sample

The respondents in the study were two African students with poor conceptual understanding of isiZulu since they attended schools where isiZulu was offered as a first or second additional language. Purposive sampling was used to identify the respondents. During the first lecture, students introduced themselves. They had to explain where they come from, the kinds of schools they went to and their background of isiZulu. This session drew the researcher's attention to two students who were the only ones in a group of twelve. They were then identified as the case study. The focus was to understand how they experienced mother tongue teaching (an African language used as the language of learning and teaching).

Instruments

At the end of the academic year, these students were asked to write their narratives on their experiences of being in an isiZulu class. Students were given a guide to help them develop their narratives. The structure of the narratives required students to talk about their background of isiZulu, how lectures were run, and how they felt about the whole module, including examination and other assessment activities. Overall, they were asked to reflect on their experiences of learning through isiZulu.

Data Analysis

There are three steps that were followed in the analysis of narratives. These steps are data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification according to Miles and Huberman (1994). Within the data reduction phase there are also four steps that were followed as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (1993). Step one was about reading the data set as a whole to get the sense of it. Secondly, topics which emerged from the data were identified. Thirdly, the list of topics that have emerged from the data sets were checked if there is no duplication. After checking they were then categorized into themes. Finally the provisional classification system on all the data sets was applied, after which coding next to the appropriate piece of data took place (McMillan and Schumacher 1993). After classifying data, the relationship or patterns between categories was checked in order to understand the link between students' experiences of learning through isiZulu and their level of competence in the language. Issues that emerged from the narratives were: appreciation of the initiative, lack of competence and anxiety, hegemony of English.

Ethical Considerations

Students were asked to participate in the study and they were given consent forms to sign. They were informed that participation is voluntary, their identities will be withheld, and that pseudonyms will be used to hide identity of any object given in the narrative, this includes the names of students as well as of schools. Since this is part of the bigger study an ethical clearance certificate was issued by the university where these students were studying.

FINDINGS

Respondent 1

Between Grade 1 and Grade 5 (Sub A to standard 3) I attended a school where the medium of instruction was isiZulu. I was taught to read and write as well as speak isiZulu for the first 5 years of my schooling. I then went to a multiracial school where the medium of instruction was English. I never encountered isiZulu academically until grade 9 (Standard 7), but this time I was doing it as a second language. From Grade 9 to Grade 12 I did isiZulu as a second language and passed it as one of my subjects.

Honestly I was very anxious at the beginning of the year {2010} because the last time I did isiZulu academically was almost 10 years ago and even then as a second language, now I have to pick it up again at a post graduate level. The one thing I pride myself in is that I never give up very easily and I was not going to start now.

The class discussions were very relaxed and very easy to engage in. I must commend the university and all the people who were involved in advancing mother tongue course at tertiary level. This has decreased some of the barriers that Zulu people go through when entering tertiary institutions as well as access to the course material. I understand that it's only this campus, hopefully soon it will be all campuses and faculties and schools.

The one thing that I feared the most was drafting assignments and writing tests. That was surprisingly not as difficult as I had anticipated. I know if I were to write in English my performance would have been much better than I did in isiZulu. In the beginning it was difficult because conversational language and academic language is very different. Overall I found the modules done in isiZulu very manageable. I also want to go out into the schools and make a difference because you have created in us a passion for teaching foundation phase that we never thought existed when we signed up for the PGCE.

Respondent 2

I attended grade 1 (class 1) in Ekwazini Primary School in Lamontville, but I did not

stay for long. I then moved to Pietermaritzburg and went to St Faith Pre-Primary. The school at that time only went up to Grade 3 (Standard 1). So I went to Pimville Primary School. I remember going to interviews and more interviews before they accepted us, into the school. Other schools at that time refused straight up. In 1991 I started grade 3 in Pimville Primary School, there were only four (4) of us coming from the previous school. English was said to be our first language and Afrikaans our second language. I was battling with Afrikaans and that was not accepted, I had to do extra classes. As the years went by more Africans came into the school, and could not speak a word of Afrikaans. Afrikaans was a subject but we had to attend compulsory lessons after school. I hated it. We had to speak and write perfect Afrikaans.

I then went to Lynveld High/Hoerskool, everything was in Afrikaans. Afrikaans was compulsory in bold. Some teachers were English speaking, but the Afrikaans science teachers taught in Afrikaans and just summarised in English, what the lesson was about. Most people did not take science because of this; learners were demanding science lessons in isiZulu. The school stopped mixing different language groups, so then there was English classes and one Afrikaans class. The Afrikaans class had all their lessons in Afrikaans, except for English.

Doing isiZulu now as a medium of instruction has been great, but I have battled. The way it has been conducted has helped me a lot, because if there were more reading I would be lost. I wrote Zulu in Matric, I could not get pass the third page of the prescribed book. I read the book everyday but did not understand, I was just reading words. I had to go through the whole book with my parents for me to understand. I do not think I even finished the exam, because I was battling. My parents encouraged me to read more text written in isiZulu, I never finished reading isiZulu newspaper I just looked at pictures. I dreaded going to church in case I was asked to come and read a scripture, and one day they did. They listened for 15 minutes, to me trying to read. I was always embarrassed when I had to read anything, in isiZulu. I started reading things slowly, but now I can read with understanding.

I thought I was torturing myself by taking isiZulu now; I kept on thinking what I am trying to do, fail the year? It was not easy I must say but the fact that we talked a lot in class helped me a lot, I learnt more from the discussions. I dreaded writing the essays because I know I cannot write isiZulu. What I say out loud makes sense to me but writing it down is something else. I'm happy I took Zulu and actually wrote something, even though all the time I was filled with anxiety and nervousness that someone will be reading my insufficient Zulu. Writing the exams was not bad but I battled with writing, the English version {of the examination question paper} helped me a lot, to understand what was needed. But writing, I was saying the words then spelling the words. Throughout these exams I have been so anxious and nervous, just by the thought of writing isiZulu.

Emerging Issues and Discussion

Appreciation of Initiative

From the responses, it was clear that both students appreciated the initiative although they struggled:

Doing isiZulu now as a medium of instruction has been great, but I have battled. (R1) I must commend the university and all the people who were involved in advancing mother tongue course at tertiary level. This has decreased some of the barriers that Zulu people go through when entering tertiary institutions as well as access to the course material. (R2)

Such initiatives help students from backgrounds where very little English was learnt to engage with concepts and theories in HE, they can gain access to reading materials and are able to express themselves better when writing. This, surely, increases their confidence in engaging in class discussions. From the narratives is clear that students have positive attitudes towards mother tongue teaching in higher education. They even wish the initiative of mother tongue teaching could extend to other schools, faculties and other higher education institutions.

The two students expressed contentment about the way lectures were conducted and found the discussions useful as they afforded them space and time to learn to engage in class discourses. The way modules are delivered to

students who are skeptical about the decision they have made is important. The way these modules were offered to students changed their attitudes. They mention in their narratives that they have developed the passion to teach in isiZulu.

Lack of Competence in isiZulu and Resultant Anxiety

Students refer to fear and anxiety when they learnt that they would be learning through mother tongue. This resulted in them having low confidence as they lacked competence in isiZulu.

I'm happy I took Zulu and actually wrote something, even though all the time I was filled with anxiety and nervousness that someone will be reading my insufficient Zulu. (R2)

This fear could result to failure and passivity in the classroom if not monitored.

Honestly I was very anxious at the beginning of the year {2010} because the last time I did isiZulu academically was almost 10 years ago and even then as a second language, now I have to pick it up again at a post graduate level. (R1)

It is the duty of those in charge to structure lessons such that students who lack competence get supported and are made to feel at ease.

I thought I was torturing myself by taking isiZulu now; I kept on thinking what I am trying to do, fail the year? It was not easy I must say but the fact that we talked a lot in class helped me a lot, I learnt more from the discussions. (R2)

This points to the importance of lecturers making activities interesting and manageable such that students are not too self-conscious of their shortcomings.

Hegemony of the English Language

Although these two students had no problem in studying through English, the fact remains that many African students went to disadvantaged schools where they completed Grade 12 with very little understanding of English, therefore if HE does not take this into consideration, they remain marginalized. It was clear that English was a stronger language for both these students as they relied on the English version of question papers for better understanding of what was expected in assessments.

Writing the exams was not bad but I battled with writing, the English version {of the examination question paper} helped me a lot, to understand what was needed. (R2)

The one thing that I feared the most was drafting assignments and writing tests. That was surprisingly not as difficult as I had anticipated. I know if I were to write in English my performance would have been much better than I did in isiZulu. (R1)

This confirms that both students have confidence in English, a sign that in their high school years they lost their competence in mother tongue which had been gained in the early years.

Due to paucity of reading materials in isiZulu, only English materials were used although discussions were in isiZulu. As a result, these two students found isiZulu lectures very manageable.

I dreaded writing the essays because I know I cannot write isiZulu. What I say out loud makes sense to me but writing it down is something else. (R2)

DISCUSSION

Although students regard mother tongue teaching in higher education as a good initiative, they reveal in findings that they were not at ease with it. The experiences of the two students about mother tongue teaching do not support the study conducted by Al-Harbi (2010) who is of the view that focusing on second language may result in students losing interest in mother tongue, neither do they support the study by Moodley (2009) conducted at another South African university which revealed that some members of the university community prefer isiZulu usage for non-academic purpose on campus such as in socializing and religious events. Failure to promote mother tongue teaching means that many young children are in danger of learning the language wrongly because their teachers are not well grounded in mother tongue. This shortcoming could be difficult to rectify. Giving these student teachers the experience of teaching and learning in mother tongue is good preparation for future practice. However, students encounter difficulty in the implementation process. When activities are given to them, their level of the knowledge of the language should be taken into consideration. A variety of assessment activities that will incorporate speaking

(where students discuss and do oral presentations) and writing are highly recommended as both students pointed out that they had difficulty when they had to do written tasks.

The findings indicate that scholars maintain that Learning in the language one understands better increases participation in class discussions as Young (2008) and Mashiya (2010) state. Not only does it increase participation in class discussions but as Hay (2009) asserts, the goal and measure of success for mother tongue education efforts is increased performance. Giving students two versions of activities was quite fruitful to students as it helped them to better understand what was expected of them in their assessment activities. This should be done continuously to support such students. Therefore there should be a reasonable budget for students who study in mother tongue to accommodate the situation. Since students found the experience of mother tongue teaching in higher education positive, the initiative should be strengthened. This does not only benefit students per se but also benefit learners who will be taught by these students in the Foundation Phase.

CONCLUSION

It is national policy that all teaching in the Foundation Phase be through mother tongue as it is stipulated in the Language in Education Policy of 1997, the policy that advocates additive bilingualism. As such, HE institutions that train teachers cannot continue to ignore the need to produce FP teachers who are competent in mother tongue teaching. This has implications for resources (staffing, materials, and budget). Universities have a responsibility to lead transformation and cannot preach what they do not practice. If we are serious about producing students who are change agents, the change has got to begin whilst the students are in training so that by the time they graduate, they have internalized the desire to challenge prevailing practices that continue to marginalize or exclude others from contributing to how the future should look like.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is stated that the potential for cognitive development depends on the social interactions

it is highly recommended that one is involved in. As such we felt that the two students' linguistic competence would be influenced by the interactions they found themselves in during the course of the module as a result the recommendations below are raised:

1. Explaining to students what the aim and importance of mother tongue teaching is, could help reduce fear and anxiety in students. There are many students we miss because of the fear factor. During orientation students should be given insight into what is happening in class so that they feel at ease and choose the specialization. Lecturers in charge should try to make activities manageable to both types of students (students with enough grounding in mother tongue and students who went to ex-model C schools).
2. Students who display serious lack of writing skills in mother tongue should be allowed to write in English since one student stated that writing in isiZulu restricted her as a result her performance was affected by the language she used in writing assessments.
3. More time need to be allowed to students who lack competence in mother tongue take too much time to finish writing when compared to people who write in a language they have good command of.

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