

A Constructivist View of Journaling: Language Learning in an English First Additional Language Classroom

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KEYWORDS First Additional Language. Language Learning. Social Practice. Constructivism. Ecology. Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT Journaling is one of the most effective activities that can be used to improve students reading and writing skills. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how journal entries can foster first additional language learning. The main aim is to show how students' progress in reading and response captured in the form of journals. The study made use of interpretivism with journal entries as the tool for data collection. The population of the study comprised nine students who were divided into three groups and purposefully chosen based on their performance and were grouped as high, medium and low. The theoretical framework was English as international language which informed the constructivist and ecological perspectives to language learning as new ways of language teaching and learning and literacies. The main findings revealed that meaning making in second language should take precedence over literal meaning. It concludes that language learning is a social practice.

INTRODUCTION

Journaling is one of the most effective activities to improve students reading and writing skills where English is regarded as First Additional Language. It plays a very significant role to students who are very shy to express themselves publicly in English since they are not confident enough to open up and talk freely about their experiences and the way they feel. The current South African Language-In- Education Policy [LiEP] (DoE 1997) specifies that all learners must learn to read in their home languages from grades 1 to 3. In schools where English or Afrikaans is not the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase, grade 4 signals a shift in the medium of instruction for all learning tasks to English, coinciding with a change in the focus of learning from concrete, basic skill development to progressively more abstract, thinking and learning tasks across a variety of learning areas. Dyers (2003) highlights that teachers, in certain schools in the country, feel that the current South African LiEP, which calls for the switch to English instruction after Grade 3 in schools where a majority of the learners are English second language speakers and learners, is contributing to educational failure amongst learners.

Objective of the Study

The main objective is to show student's progress in reading and response. In view of

this, reading and response can be seen as a core area for fostering student's academic performances. This is because one of the core reasons for failure to perform well in examinations is attributed to student's inability to read and understand basic instructions during examinations (Linake 2015). In addition, reading and response engages students in all the four literacy skills which are a must acquire for students in tertiary institutions.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is premised with-in Foncha's (2013) English as international language (EIL) to assist in data analysis and interpretation. It was also used to identify and explain facts and the relationship between facts. This means that it helped the researchers to summarize previous information and guided their future course of action. In this regard, EIL is an essential tool of research in stimulating the advancement of knowledge further (Macleod and Saraga 1999). The choice of EIL is based on the fact that it explains and identifies the issues and insights properly. In view of this, McKay (2002) says that it is the non-native speakers of English who make English to be well known and common worldwide since it enables speakers to share their ideas and cultures too. English as an international language is commonly used since it is a medium of instructions in most South African schools. This is because South Africa is a

rainbow nation with 11 official languages. As a result, English is used to put the nation together by making it easier for the speakers to come together and work as one nation by sharing different ideas and cultures for the improvement of South African education and the economy. Jenkins (2003) thinks that English is considered as associates. This means that English is spoken all over the world. Based on this, there are varieties of spoken English throughout the world, particularly in South Africa since it is highly influenced by each country's native languages (Jenkins 2003). In addition, it is a minority language in South Africa which has only a few native speakers compared to other languages in South Africa though it plays a very significant role in learning and teaching due to its standardised nature. It is further regarded as a language of business, tourism, education, science, computer technology, media and Internet (Myer-Scotton 2006). This means that everything revolves around English though some other scholars have different perceptions towards English. They feel that English has a capacity to destroy other languages and cultures. For instance, Kamwangamalu (2003), Ominiya (2006) and Schmied (1995) argue that Africans' attitudes toward English range from positive to a dislike for the language because some people think that English oppresses other languages and others think that by acquiring English, they stand the risk of losing their cultures. In view of all these debates, English emerges as the language of business, law and government. Therefore, English plays a very significant role as a common language by unifying the diverse linguistic nature of South Africa (Foncha 2013).

As proponents of EIL, we suggest that English as a first additional language to South Africans comes with more benefits since it is the world's lingua franca. To this effect, many South Africans choose to learn English as an additional language. English has nothing to diminish other languages and cultures, instead it brings together different cultural experiences and contexts in order to accommodate everyone and to encourage understanding so as to enhance and improve the social and economic status (Garcia 2009). It is highly advisable that English should be used as a medium of instruction in schools in order to maintain interrelationships because children from different linguistics and socio-economic backgrounds meet in one class. Based

on this, they are required to master English as a common language for communication purpose in order to cope wherever they go (Foncha 2013).

The Constructivist Perspective

From a constructivist point of view, learners should not be treated as empty vessels since they come from different background with different experiences. They just need proper guidance and support from the teachers during the lesson in order to move on so that they can become competent and independent at a later stage. In light of the constructivist perspective, Vygotsky (1978) sees 'scaffolding' as the role that teachers need to play. He states that learners need the support from everyone around them to be independent and to become successful in life. It is essential to note that in the process of scaffolding, there is collaboration and negotiation taking place between the teacher and the students. The teacher under such situation becomes a facilitator/mediator who guides the student until the point of discovery. This means that students construct their own understanding by reflecting on their personal experiences and by relating the new knowledge with what they already know and learn to adjust (Mitchell and Myles, 1988). One of such skills could be the provocation of the student's experiential knowledge where social constructivists see reading and learning as social practice. The social context affects when a person reads, what he/she reads, where he/she reads from, who he/she reads with and, of course, why and how he/she reads (Linake 2015). Luke and Freebody (2002) talk about four different reader resources which could assist learners to construct the meaning properly. These reader resources are: code breaking, meaning making, text using, and text analyses.

Furthermore, the main focus of the constructivist theory is on learners learning and the quest for new knowledge. In other words, learners learn best by trying to make sense of something on their own with the teacher as a guide to help them along the way. Dudeney (2003) supports this idea by highlighting that constructivists believe that the learner learns best when she/he is actively engaged since the learner is viewed as one who acts on objects and events within his or her environment and in the process, they gain understanding and derive meaning from

those objects and events. Moerk (1994) states that educators should know that the best way to learn is by having learners construct their own knowledge instead of having someone construct it for them. In this view, learning is an active process of creating meaning from different experiences by interacting between the parts and the whole which they form (Foncha 2013). Archer (2010) emphasizes that there is need to assist students who come to the universities inadequately prepared. Students need to have a clear idea of why they learn and be able relate to other aspects of their academic courses through the support and services offered from intervention centres. Students also need encouragement to move beyond this and to become independent academically.

Wilson (1998) argues that teachers need to encourage students to create their own meanings from text rather than to impose interpretation of the meaning upon them. To say this differently, teachers should be resources to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap that students experience in reading a text since most of the teachers have a tendency of dominating the lesson by telling students the meaning of the text rather than assisting them to create meaning themselves (Linake 2015). In this regard, teachers and texts play a very significant role in students reading and response since interaction with the text can build a strong relationship between these three parties. For example, the questions the teachers ask should show a genuine interest in the meanings the students construct rather than insisting on pre-conceived understandings and interpretation of a given text.

Language as Barrier to Learning

In view of the constructivist perspective, first additional language (FAL) can be a barrier in the situation where it dominates the native language. For instance, in South African Schools, English seems to be a barrier to education because it is a FAL to many South African's students and being used as the medium of instruction. In this regard, students are forced to communicate and interact with each other using English despite the fact that it is FAL to most of them (Foncha and Sivasubramaniam 2014). This seems to affect students' performance because they are not confident enough to express themselves and respond properly using English.

On the contrary, Foncha (2013) argues that even though English first additional language (EFAL) is a barrier to most South Africans' Students, it plays a very significant role of uniting speakers whose languages are different. This is meant to accommodate everyone and encourage understanding as to enhance and improve the social and economic status since South Africa is a rainbow nation. That means English is the world's lingua franca.

Language as social practice is seen as an interaction among students together with their lecturers during the classroom and out of the classroom situation. Dudeney (2003) is in favour of language as a social practice when he argues that students can interact and participate properly with others and with relevant resources during the and after lessons resulting to diverse practices.

Based on the above discussion, study skills, academic socialization and academic literacy can be used in FAL classroom situation in order to promote and encourage interaction and participation between the students and lecturers. These models can assist students to adapt new ways of knowing: understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge in reading and response also to be able to explore and respond appropriately. Secondly, Lea and Street (1998) refer to this kind of learning as academic socialisation. In such situations, the task of the tutor/adviser is to induct students into a new culture, that of the academy. This approach is concerned with the students' orientation to learning and interpretation of learning tasks through conceptualization. Lea and Street (1998) favour a third approach which is academic literacy that views literacy as a process not a product. It views reading and learning as issues at the level of identities rather than skills or socialization. He further asserts that "academic literacy that practices reading within disciplines constitute a central process through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study" (Lea and Street 1998: 158). In favour of the ongoing debate, Moerk (1994) suggests models such as: asking question which allow learners to ask each other questions which can encourage communication and critical thinking and inquiry among themselves. He further notes that, creating awareness of the author behind the text setting. Other approaches may include using Macro tasks such as producing a

web-based magazine for the school, contact an advertising campaign, produce radio broadcasting on local radio and role-play to encourage and promote frequent presentations. These approaches may challenge the traditional belief of EFAL teachers or class since students are drawn into energetic participation in text events. In view of this, the researchers argue that they are entering into active dialogues with texts and their (Moerk 1994).

Ecology

In view of the constructivist and ecological perspectives discussed earlier, an environment and/or harmonious atmosphere like home, school and peer groups reading can be much effective since students would have been exposed at an early age by their parents, friends and teachers in the classroom. Such an exposure can shape their minds at an early stage and they may be able to acquire basic skills in reading to become independent and competent at later stage. This is evidenced by Nwabueze (2011) who argues that an environment plays a very significant role in the development of reading culture. This means a lack of proper exposure and support for children at an early stage resulting to bad attitude towards reading later on. It should be noted that children with positive reading attitudes tend to be willing and may volunteer to read because they enjoy it. This effect can lead to proficient and lifelong readers. On the other hand, children with poor attitudes toward reading may only read when they are forced to since they totally avoid reading and even refuse to read altogether (Satija 2002). In view of this, the child's attitude toward reading may have a profound impact upon his or her overall academic progress. That is the reason why teachers, parents and peers should take this seriously in assisting to change a child's negative attitude towards reading by giving full support that can make the child to understand the importance of being proficient in reading.

Children should be educated so that they are aware that reading is important for the development of their language skills. In short language should act as a factor which influences the growth of their intellectual and emotional beings. Satija (2002) further observes that if the child is exposed enough to reading, he/she may become empowered and knowledgeable. Thus,

this can enable him/her to participate freely in the social, religious, cultural and political life. It is within this eavesdrops that this researcher is anxious to find ways of instilling a positive reading attitude in the students. In effect, it can only be achieved through a partnership between parents, teachers and more focused peers to elevate the culture of reading in students.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is harvested from Linake's PhD thesis that focuses on reading and response among English first additional language students of the University of Fort Hare where Foncha was the supervisor. The sample constituted of nine students that were divided into three groups and who were purposively selected based on their performance in English and as such was classified as high, medium and low. The tool for data collection was journal entries by the students which were done at three stages to ascertain that there was some growth in student's reading/writing and response. The journals were done for four consecutive years where these students' development in both reading and writing were captured as they progressed. It was a longitudinal study that took four years in the Faculty of Education, University of Fort Hare and Linake was a lecturer who played the role of an insider. The researchers obtained an ethical certificate from the University of Fort Hare and also sought consent from the participants to make sure all codes of ethics were duly considered. The data was reliable because it was triangulated by the use of other tools like interviews, book reviews, assessment tasks etc. It is needful to stress that, this paper made use only of the journals because this particular tool was the most informative and informed all the themes where the data was coded.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers are trying to narrate and construct stories of the students reading and writing which led them to view the students' journals as evolving accounts of literary engagement and response in English as their first additional language. This simply refers to student's absorption, involvement, commitment and enjoyment in the reading process. Such an engagement nurtures readers' intuitive responses

to literary interpretation and aesthetic judgement which might serve as contrast to the intellectualized literary analyses modelled on critical dogma which this research holds in disdain (Rosenblatt 1978). In view of this, the researchers were particularly interested in understanding the students' journals as a space where multiple interpretations might exist in tentativeness subject to scrutiny and re-examination from multiple perspectives. Based on the points raised so far, the researchers would therefore, present and analyse students' journals in three stages.

Stage 1 focuses on journal entries related to English Teaching Methods EDL 212 and 222, Stage 2 to EDL 312 and 322, and then Stage 3 focuses on journal entries related to English Teaching Methods for fourth year level MEN 411. In stage 1, the researchers introduced the students to journaling procedures with the view to improve students' reading and response in English as their first additional language. At this stage, the researchers wanted to check students' feelings of insecurity and frustrations towards the classroom where English is involved to see how to assist them towards a positive attitude towards English. The researchers also tried to check the students' adjustability towards the fear of being laughed at for not knowing something and for not expressing themselves freely and appropriately in English during classroom discussion.

In stage 2, the researchers gradually checked students improvement towards their previous mistakes highlighted from stage 1. At this stage, the researcher wanted to identify a growing awareness in students, which encouraged them to think about aspects of human existence that they shared with their equals in other cultures. In addition, the researchers sought to check whether the students could relate the text to their own emotions and relationships.

In stage 3, the researchers wanted to see if the journaling would make them to feel that their own use of English was more than a mere academic task but to open up pathways for them into the imaginable area of experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that majority of the students preferred English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) though they have difficulties in mastering the language due to a poor

exposure to it. In other words, the situation regarding English FAL and LoLT complicated their lives at tertiary level especially at first year level. It is a completely challenging situation because if students were exposed to English at earlier grades, they would have started communicating freely and with confidence at the tertiary level during the lectures and also when they come across colleagues who were fortunate enough to have been exposed to English earlier (Foncha 2013). The difficulties that students experienced were that it was not easy for them to read and respond in English. Most students indicated that the transition period was problematic and they suggested that English should start from grade 1 as LoLT in order for learners from the lower grades to be able to master English by the time they come to the upper primary phase. In view of this, Banda (2009) observes that parents demanded that English medium be introduced as LoLT. Based on the above, the main reason why code-switching takes place in schools is because English is not a lingua franca, so people communicate in their own mother tongue and this might be going on for many years to come if something is not done.

The constructivist paradigm of the researchers and the attitude and beliefs underlying it necessitated a search for ideas and views that are consistent with such paradigm. Based on this, the researchers reviewed the literature which identified theoretical and practical issues that supported a constructivist approach to this investigation. The review of reading led the study to identify the role of self-discovery and empowerment in the acts of reading and writing. In this view, the study decided to use expressivity models of reading and writing to foster response to reading.

The deployment of reading and response in a classroom context requires the literature review to visit the different approaches to reading and response teaching and the criteria for texts selection. In keeping with the constructivist approach of this research, the researchers decided to use a combination of personal-response and reader-response approaches to reading and response in an EFAL setting. The decision to use theme-based texts was believed to support the choice of approach to the use of text in this study (Rosenblatt 1995).

Dyers (2003:61) contend that educators are struggling to respond adequately to the in-

creased linguistic diversity found amongst learners in their classrooms. In addition, Heugh (2006: 9) affirms that most learners who have to make the transition from “reading to learn” in Grade 4 “simply fall into the gap between learning in the mother tongue and learning through a second language of education, English. Most teachers do not know how to help their learners successfully to bridge this gap”. Recently, planned alterations to the current LiEP were announced (Pandor 2006). In effect, this means that the switch to English is now more likely to occur at the beginning of the Grade 7 for those learners who have been learning in languages other than English or Afrikaans from the beginning of formal schooling. This shift in policy is in line with a large corpus of research into bilingual education “best practices” (Alidou et al. 2006).

Nonetheless, despite this proposed change to six years of mother tongue education, if learners still have not developed the literacy skills and reading proficiency needed to cope with academic tasks and for academic progress, then there may be little change to learners’ poor academic performance outcomes. In South Africa, reading problems tend to be masked by language proficiency issues. It is assumed that poor academic performance is caused by poor mother tongue proficiency. An associated assumption is that when learners have difficulty with using reading as a tool for learning then their comprehension problems are a product of limited language proficiency. This then leads to the idea that language proficiency and reading ability is alike (Pretorius 2002: 174). It must be noted that, although English is used as a main language of teaching instruction in South African schools, poor literacy results cannot be solely attributed to second language instruction as teachers and learners are struggling with literacy in the African Languages [AL] as well as English (Pretorius and Machet 2004). In this regard, improving the language proficiency of learners does not automatically improve their reading comprehension. Attention to reading improves reading skills and as such, the actual implementation of this policy in various contexts is complicated by socioeconomic, political and social factors that are pushing the drive towards English as a language of instruction (de Wet 2002). In view of the above argument, this paper strives to find out different means and strategies through

which First Additional Language (FAL) proficiency can be improved in order to foster “reading to learn among the learners (Linake 2015).

CONCLUSION

The theme-based texts used in the study were well suited to foster reading competence which is the skills and strategies that students could acquire as a result of an awareness-raising process. The findings further kick against the transmission model of teaching and learning which projects the teacher as a knowledgeable person conveying information to empty passive learners. This reinforced the researchers’ belief that involvement with a text could accrue only through a personalization of the text attempted by the students. In this respect, the use of personal response and reader response approaches to text have demonstrated their efficacy in fostering emotional involvement in the students and facilitating their response to text. The different readings and the tentative interpretations of the students voiced in the data, represent a view of language awareness which capture both literal and figurative meanings depending on the type of texts students were exposed to. This brought flexibility in language awareness in the sense that students’ attempts were bold enough to make sense of what they were trying to say and also referring to the world around them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A study of this nature should not only focus on language awareness based on literal meanings but also it should also employ figurative language where students would be encouraged to have alternatives to explore where language is concerned. That is, the researchers felt that an emphasis on literal meanings at the expense of de-emphasizing figurative meanings is inconsistent with the educational value system of the researcher.

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