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Linguistic challenges faced by Grade 7 Setswana learners when writing Science examinations in English

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the linguistic challenges faced by Setswana-speaking Grade 7 learners when writing Science examinations in English. In South African schools, non-mother tongue speakers of English learners are only introduced to English as a language of learning and teaching in Grade 4, which creates problems for these learners because English is foreign to them. The purpose of conducting this research was to help policymakers meet the linguistic needs of non-native English speakers, make curriculum development specialists aware of the linguistic challenges faced by non-native speakers of English and help readers gain a better understanding of why some teachers prefer to use indigenous languages when they teach in English. The participants comprised

four purposively selected Grade 7 Natural Science teachers, two school governing bodies (SGBs) and Grade 7 learners from two primary schools in Hammanskraal, Gauteng. Data gathered indicated that Setswana-speaking learners made basic errors related to spelling, sentence construction, grammar, incomplete sentences, mixed languages, using words that do not exist, tenses and understanding instructions. As a result, SGBs should consider these linguistic challenges when they draft language policies for rural and township schools.

Key words: Language of learning and teaching (LoLT), Examinations, linguistic challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Many schools in South Africa (SA) choose to use English as a medium of instruction, leading to non-native English-speaking learners learning content through a second language (Uys, van der Walt & Botha, 2007:69-82). Linguists are working to identify specific areas that consistently challenge these non-native speakers on their linguistic trajectory (Jones, 2014). Learners face specific challenges regarding spoken English proficiency and the need to meet the educational standards in speaking and writing (Kamara, 2004). During the apartheid era, model C schools with many black learners used Afrikaans and English as media of instruction at the beginning of schooling, and then African languages in subsequent years in the education system known as Bantu education (Evans & Cleghorn, 2012; Mhlauli, Salani & Mokotedi, 2015:203-219). In those days, Evans & Cleghorn (2012) explain, "African languages had no official status although the Bantu Education Act of 1953 stipulated that black learners should receive mother tongue instruction in primary schools with transition to English and Afrikaans from Grade 9."

What helped was that in 1994, the new government saw the disadvantage of using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools with mainly Black learners and produced a language policy to protect the indigenous languages. The South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) and the South African Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997) now allow School Governing Body members (SGBs) to choose the language they want to use as a medium of instruction. Many schools in rural and township areas use English as the Language of Teaching and Learning (LoLT) (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999:131-162). This is despite research findings that show the difficulties that English as a LoLT creates for classroom learning and teaching (Paakki, 2013). Schools use mother tongue instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 3 and then transition to English in Grade 4 (Uys, van der Walt & Botha, 2007:69-82). As a result, Grade 4 learners are faced with the challenge of understanding the curriculum content while learning in English (Mackay, 2014:1)

In South Africa (SA), many communities living in townships and rural and areas use a common language (Setswana being one such language) to communicate. Learners grow up speaking their mother tongue. It becomes difficult for them to adjust from speaking their mother tongue to English in the classroom. The difficulties in adapting to speaking English result in learners not coping when writing examinations and tests (Mackay, 2014:13). Phatudi (2007) states that, in general, among indigenous language speakers, learners struggle to answer Science question papers in English. They need assistance with translating words into their mother tongue and correct spelling. The difficulty is brought by the fact that when learners are writing examinations teachers cannot support them by explaining what the questions require. This ultimately affects their overall academic performance because the examination marks contribute 60% towards their final year mark.

The South African National Curriculum Statement (NCS) states that, "since English is used as LoLT, its learning and teaching should achieve levels of proficiency that

meet the threshold level necessary for effective learning across the curriculum.” This proficiency applies to the four cognitive academic language skills required, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Uys, van der Walt & Botha, 2007:69-82). The South African NCS further states that the language of learning and teaching in Foundation Phase should be an African language, whereas in the Intermediate Phase it should be English. The transitioning from Foundation Phase to Intermediate Phase is found to be a problem in many rural and township schools because learners now use a language which they are not familiar with as the LoLT (Evans & Nthulana, 2018:2-9). When learners are in Grade 5 and 6, the curriculum does not allow content subject teachers to teach them English language skills. These learners enter the Senior Phase (Grade 7) with the same dilemma they faced from Grade 4 (Mackay, 2014). Mackay (2014:13) observed that an increasing number of learners whose home language is an African language experience challenges in translating, understanding, and constructing sentences in English in all their seven subjects. The problem of learners struggling to use English continues to affect their academic performance in primary school and remains a problem as they proceed to high school and tertiary level (Jordaan, 2011-13).

According to Thobejane (2018:6), research related to Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU), South African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and Annual National Assessments (ANA) also found that learners in rural and township schools read and write at a far lower level than the required standard. This affects how they read, understand, and answer their examination question papers. Thobejane (2018), Phajane and Mokhele (2013) attest, in addition, that learners find themselves having teachers who are not trained to teach reading and writing in English. Learners therefore struggle to grasp the language because some teachers from rural and township schools are not fluent in English. Apart from this, parents at home do not speak English and therefore, learners are only exposed to the language when they read books and newspapers. Also, important to note is the fact that there are no libraries in rural areas, which makes it difficult for the learners to improve their English proficiency.

The Grade 6 learners in all South African schools write Mathematics and Natural Science and Technology provincial papers in English while they lack the reading skills and struggle to understand the language. The problem is that Mathematics is one of the core subjects that learners have to pass in order to proceed to the next grade. The purpose of this study is to conscientize the stakeholders involved with school curriculum regarding the challenges of using English to teach non-native English speakers, and highlight its impact on learners’ academic performance. Specifically, this study highlights the challenges faced by Setswana-speaking Grade 7 learners when writing Science examinations in English. The primary research question is: What linguistic challenges do Grade 7 Setswana learners face when writing Science examinations in English? The secondary research question is: What are SGBs’ perceptions about the linguistic challenges faced by Grade 7 Setswana-speaking learners when writing Science examinations in English?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature sources state that non-native English-speaking learners underachieve academically because of learning in a language that is not their first language (O'Connor & Geiger, 2009:253-269; Dawber & Jordan, 1999; Ortiz, 1997:323; Statham, 1997:18-22). These learners show poor listening, reading, and writing skills and struggle to concentrate. Most of them do not take part in class or group discussions because their inadequacy in English vocabulary causes embarrassment for them when they have to speak. They take time to finish tests and at times do not finish the whole question paper because they struggle to construct sentences in English.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1999), learners in countries such as Cameroon who were taught in their mother tongue perform better in reading and comprehension compared to those taught in English only. The report further supports the position that mother tongue-based multilingual education positively affects the acquisition of a second language (Evans & Nthulana, 2018). In Northern Botswana, teaching Mathematics in English creates several professional challenges for teachers. Teachers are forced to develop different teaching strategies, for example, code-switching and translating words into Setswana (Evans & Nthulana, 2018).

The language policy in SA supports a multilingual approach to education (Taljard, 2015:15). Taljard (2015) points out that learners who are native to English and Afrikaans in South Africa are the only ones who are currently enjoying the benefits of mother tongue education from Grade 1 to university/higher education level because the two groups were linguistically privileged during Apartheid and still are to date. The new language policy was implemented to protect African languages, but learners who are non-native English speakers in rural and township schools are currently not benefiting from the policies because English and Afrikaans are still used as LoLT even in the post-Apartheid era. According to Collins and Ellis (2008:330), South African Grade 7 learners struggle to provide well-constructed answers to questions when answering question papers. They struggle to give logical responses in English but can do so in their mother tongue. When an instruction is given in a language that learners do not understand, there will often be misunderstanding, resulting in difficulties in learning (Bigg, 1990:20). This affects the learners' reading ability for comprehension. Learners take time to understand instructions, because they must have reading skills to comprehend before they can start processing those instructions (Evans & Nthulana, 2018). Such learners are usually promoted to higher grades despite their having inadequate reading skills and vocabulary acquired in the lower grades. A progression of this nature creates a recurring and developing gap which eventually becomes significant and unmanageable to both learners and teachers.

The current language policy stipulates that learners have the right to be taught in a language that they understand. However, the contradiction inherent in this stipulation

is that most, if not all, the learning materials and examination question papers are written in English. The learner, therefore, does not have the liberty to choose a language (Evans & Nthulana, 2018). Section C of the South African Act of 1996 empowers SGB members to draft the language policies for their schools and even decide on the language to be used as a medium of instruction. Most of these SGBs choose English as the LoLT. In choosing English as the medium of instruction, the SGB members believe that African languages are of little value when it comes to education (Masondo, 2015). One of the factors that SGBs consider when choosing the LoLT is that the language chosen must be in line with the language used in textbooks and question papers (which is English). This means that SGBs do not have a choice when choosing the LoLT. English is thus, chosen because it is the language that will be used during examinations.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a mixed methods qualitative approach whereby the data collection tools were classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews with open-ended questions. As Cohen et.al (2018:293) observe, observational techniques are used extensively to acquire data on real life situations. Classroom observations were used in this study to observe the interaction between learners and teaching during a Science lesson. This research is a phenomenological study because it focuses on the experiences of learners, SGBs, and teachers on using English as a medium of instruction. According to Hammersley (2013:27), phenomenological research is based on the view that knowledge is rooted in our immediate experiences, and that the task of the researcher is to describe, understand, interpret and explain these experiences. In this study, the experiences of the participants will be described and interpreted in order to arrive at the findings. Experiences can be expressed in the form of lived and told stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Research sites

The research for this article was conducted at two primary schools in Hammanskraal, in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Hammanskraal is situated in the north-west of Pretoria and embraces rural and township areas. The first school is in the township part of Hammanskraal and the second in a rural village. The common denominator in selecting the research sites and locations was that although the languages spoken in Hammanskraal are Sepedi (18,1 %), Xitsonga (14,7 %), Sesotho (4,3 %) and IsiZulu (3 %), Setswana (46,2 %) is spoken by the vast majority. The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality had a population of 2921488 (463.89 per km²) in 2011. The majority of the people living in Hammanskraal were a total of 22 028 47 black Africans who formed 75.40% of the population in 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

Sampling

Purposive sampling, defined as non-probability sampling that carefully chooses participants based on the characteristics of a population and objective of the study (Crossman, 2017), was used. It can also be described as the process of choosing few participants who can influence the researcher's understanding of certain phenomena (Phahlamohlaka, 2017:22). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose people that are knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (MacMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Four teachers, two SGBs, and 112 learners were sampled from two public schools found in rural and township parts of Hammanskraal. The four teachers were aware of the language difficulties that learners encounter in class and during assessments.

Participants and selection criteria

Of the 112 Grade 7 learners who participated in the study, 56 were from each school and their ages ranged from 12 and 15. In addition, there were two Natural Science teachers and one SGB member from each school. The teachers were experienced in teaching Grade 7 Natural Sciences. The two selected SGB members had knowledge of the language policy regarding the LoLT. The learners were given questionnaires whilst the teachers and SGBs were interviewed. The schools selected for participation were co-educational in order to ensure that the data were collected from both boys and girls.

Data collection process and analysis

The data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, questionnaires, and a document analysis of the learners' examination answer sheets. The reason for using multiple methods of data collection was to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The other reason was to reduce the bias and limitations that may result from using a single method of data collection. During the data collection process, the learners were allowed to respond and answer in Setswana to allow them to express themselves without stressing about sentence construction and spelling in another language. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder application from a cell phone and the responses later transcribed into text. Those that were in Setswana were translated into English. The interpretation of the data was presented in the form of narratives, pictures and tables. Inductive thematic analysis was used because it was considered to be appropriate for developing codes and themes

Ethical clearance

In compliance with the ethics requirements for research, clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria. Furthermore, permission to conduct research was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), school principals, teachers, parents and learners. The details of research regarding ethical protection, confidentiality,

anonymity and the fact that participation was voluntary were all taken into account. The data collected will be stored by the university for 15 years.

FINDINGS

The themes identified during the study were the following: teachers' limited English proficiency, teacher and learner interaction in classrooms, the impact of English as a LoLT on the learners' academic performance, Setswana as a home language, the teachers' use of code-switching and code-mixing, the SGBs' role in schools and their perceptions about using English as the LoLT, as well as learners who are not Setswana and English native speakers. I deal with each of these one after the other in the sections below.

Teachers' limited English proficiency

The classroom observations revealed that engagement between the teachers and learners were mainly conducted in Setswana. Furthermore, it was also observed that teachers lacked the confidence to teach in English, but that they were comfortable to use Setswana in teaching. Some of them read directly from the prescribed textbook when they defined scientific terms to the learners. Teachers' limited English proficiency affects their learners' English acquisition negatively and affect their learning. Language acts as a basic communication channel for transferring content knowledge from the educator to the learner. If the knowledge communication channel is negatively affected by limited English proficiency, knowledge transfer will be unsuccessful (Nel & Müller, 2010:635-650). Although the interviewed teachers stated that they preferred English as the LoLT, it was evident that they struggled when speaking or teaching in English. The above is in line with Dippenaar and Peyper's (2011) argument that if a teacher is not proficient in the LoLT, it reduces the learner's chances of success in learning.

Teacher-learner interaction

The teacher-learner interaction in the Natural Science classroom is minimised by the medium of instruction, which was English in this case. Teachers were discouraged by poor response from learners. They could not answer the teacher's questions and the result was that lessons went on without teachers asking questions. This is quite common in classes where English as a second language is used as a medium of instruction; some teachers just teach without engaging the learners for the greater part of a lesson. They do the talking and learners just agree to everything that is presented to them without participating. Sometimes when questions are asked in English, learners fail to respond, but when the same questions are asked in Setswana, about 80% of the learners start to respond. This was evident in the classroom observation. In the present study, one teacher said in the interview: "*Learners tend to struggle to understand if I introduce*

or explain Science terms in English. I normally use Setswana when explaining those terms". Due to the learners' limited vocabulary in English, a greater part of the lesson was conducted in Setswana to ensure that there was teacher-learner engagement.

Code-switching (CS) and code-mixing (CM)

Code-switching entails a switch to other languages when communicating while code-mixing describes the mixing of two languages at word level. It was found, in the present study, that CS and CM were used concomitantly. The educators used English at first and switched to Setswana and spent much of their time using Setswana to teach. Some teachers translated questions into Setswana so that her learners could understand what was said, and this got the learners to participate. Teachers that participated in this study overused CS during lesson presentations while some learners used CM when they answered the questionnaires. In contrast to this, when learners are assessed, they are expected to answer question papers in English. Webb and du Plessis (2006) declare that although code-switching is necessary for learners to gain knowledge, overusing it could inhibit learning. One of the teachers said: "*I have translated some questions into Setswana because the learners did not understand them. I also code-switch because learners struggle to understand when I use English only*". Thus, in order to ensure the smooth running of a lesson, teachers resorted to CS and CM. Unfortunately, it seemed as though those strategies were overused since learners depended on them greatly. As an example, this was found in a learner's exam answer book: " I do not *tthaloganya*". *Tthaloganya* is a Setswana word which means 'understand'. This learner wanted to explain that he did not understand but due to lack of the relevant vocabulary, he wrote it in Setswana. Similar examples were found throughout the learners' answer books.

English as first additional language and LoLT

South Africa, which has different cultures and 11 official languages, has chosen English as a LoLT (Wijayatunga, 2018:151-161). This has yielded negative consequences in education, especially for those who are non-native speakers of the language. It was evident that the Setswana-speaking Grade 7 learners faced more negative consequences during the Natural Science class where English was used as the LoLT. These are the learners who learn English as a First Additional language and Setswana as a Home language. The learners struggle with grasping English in Grade 7 because the time allocated to learn the four language skills in English in both the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, is limited. Setswana as a home language is allocated more hours compared to English as a First Additional language, and yet, the non-native English-speaking learners are expected to grasp the language in three years of schooling. The other reason is that teachers spend most of their time teaching in Setswana rather than English.

English First Additional language CAPS Foundation Phase explains that many learners from rural and township schools start using their additional language namely English,

as a LoLT in Grade 4. According to Phatudi and Moletsane (2013), children can transfer literacy skills from their home language to English easily by reading books written in English, speaking English with people who are familiar with it, writing English words, and listening to stories written in English. That, however, was not observed during data collection. Learners in Grade 7 struggle with writing and speaking English, meaning that they never grasped it from the Foundation Phase.

Learners who are non-native speakers of Setswana and English

It was discovered during data collection that not all learners who participated in this study are Setswana home language speakers. Only 30.8% of them were native speakers of Setswana. This means that some learners were not native to the two languages used for instruction, namely Setswana and English. Therefore, learners had to master two unfamiliar languages. This finding indicates that there is a need for a second additional language, which must be a language spoken by most learners besides Setswana. It was evident from the data analysis that the second most spoken languages by the learners in the two schools are Xitsonga and Sepedi. According to Mokibelo (2016), speakers of other languages besides Setswana and English are hindered from speaking their native languages in the classrooms. Mokibelo (2016:666) explains that this could cause problems in different situations because the languages used for instruction are not used as home languages by the other learner population. Transition could be problematic for the learners who are not Setswana and English speakers because they must learn both languages of instruction for the first time at school as second or third languages (Mokibelo, 2016:666). One learner raised this concern in the following words: *“I am struggling to understand the meaning of some words and I can’t explain them. I am Tsonga and sometimes I struggle to understand even Setswana”*. Another one said: *“Sometimes they give us difficult questions so we don’t understand what the question is saying”*. These examples do not only show how the learners’ struggled with English, it also shows that non-native Setswana speakers battled too.

Learners who are not native speakers of Setswana are forced to adapt, become part of the Batswana group and assimilate into the culture of the Setswana-speaking groups (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004:243). These learners, therefore, have problems that differ from those of the native speakers of Setswana and English as a second language (Mokibelo, 2016:666). There was also the issue of teachers who spoke other languages besides Setswana and imposed those languages on the learners. Teacher 2 from school A spoke isiZulu as a first language, for example. She explained that *“I cannot speak or explain to the learners in Setswana. I only teach them in English and in the case where they do not understand, I ask another learner to explain to the rest in Setswana”*. This shows that there is no CS and CM and that the interaction is very minimal. Therefore, these non-native Setswana learners are forced to understand Setswana, English and in some cases, another language spoken as the mother tongue by the teacher.

The SGBs' role in schools

The SGBs take part in the creation and implementation of policies. The SGBs interviewed for this study supported the use of English as the LoLT but mentioned that they were completely aware of the difficulties that learners face. They mentioned that using English was for the best, especially for Black learners. The disadvantage, they pointed out, was that learners were only exposed to English at school during English lessons. This was a problem because teachers were using a language which learners were not familiar with. The researcher asked one SGB member during the interview why they preferred English as the LoLT and the answer was that it would help learners with proficiency in future when they have to work in other English-speaking countries. In addition to that, one SGB member said *“Due to the fact that the school does not have all the native speakers of Setswana, it will only be fair to use the language that will be understood by everyone, which is English”*. The SGB members went further to explain that even the teaching resources were available in English and that it was fitting therefore to use it as the LoLT.

However, the same SGB member expressed the wish to be interviewed in Setswana. The participant stated that it was difficult for them to communicate in English since they did not understand it. They further stated that there should be manuals written in the languages that they understood. It seems as if SGBs do not look at the disadvantages of using English when they draft language policies. They only focus on the advantages of using it as the LoLT.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this article were based on the literature review, research questions and data analysis. The discussion of these findings is approached from the point of view of the attempt to answer the research questions and evaluating the data collected. What was discovered during data collection was that teachers' English vocabulary and proficiency was limited. This resulted in minimum interaction between the educator and learners in class. In trying to enhance communication and learner engagement, both teachers and learners' resorted to CS and CM. There was an overuse of these strategies, which affected the learners' performance in assessments. These learners had become used to the idea of using Setswana to learn Natural Science, which had become a problem when they got to the examinations because question papers are written in English. Eventually, the outcome of this study emanates from the overuse of CS that is happening in class, affecting performance in assessments.

The data gathered also revealed that Setswana-speaking learners displayed many spelling errors in their sentence construction, erratic grammar, incomplete sentences, mixed languages, the use of words that do not exist, incorrect tenses, and a poor understanding of instructions when answering the Natural Science examination question papers. The classroom observations indicated that learners struggled as a result of limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, confusion of gender, and poor concentration due

to lack of understanding during content delivery. Meanwhile, the interviews with the SGB members revealed that despite the fact that they were not proficient in English, they still preferred it to be used as the LoLT. Their perception is that English is a universal language and that it will advantage learners in future when communicating with people across the globe.

In addition, the SGB members stressed that English should be introduced as the LoLT from Grade R to 7 since internal, provincial and national question papers are written in that language. They further stated their intention to consider changing the language policy of their schools to include using English as the LoLT from Grade R to 7. They expressed their hope that this would help equip learners with the correct vocabulary and to avoid the linguistic challenges faced by Grade 7 learners.

As revealed by the present study, the linguistic challenges faced by these learners include spelling errors, failure to construct simple sentences in English, failure to express themselves in classroom discussions and inability to carry out tasks/activities. Furthermore, they did not understand examination instructions, mixed Setswana and English and struggled to understand scientific concepts in English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations were made based on the scope and results of this study. They were guided by the literature review, data collected and analysed, and the significance of the study.

Firstly, teacher training is needed to support the implementation of the language in education policy in South African schools. Content subject teachers need training in second language acquisition and teaching in a second language (O'Connor & Geiger, 2009). The GDE should consider revising the time allocated to English first additional language lessons. Teachers should be encouraged to use English during lesson presentations or alternatively, schools can consider opting for an indigenous language as a LoLT.

Secondly, in order to promote multilingualism and language development, the Department of Basic Education (DoBE) should at least provide provincial examination question papers in English and African languages like it does with English and Afrikaans. Most provinces have one dominant African language on which they could focus, and this would make the work far easier. This would help learners draw on their mother tongue when they do not understand the questions.

Lastly, rural and township schools should be provided with equipped libraries. Many schools in rural and township areas do not have libraries from which learners can borrow books. Schools which have libraries should regulate the borrowing of books and keep track of their movement to avoid them getting lost without trace. English, Mathematics and

Natural science teachers should be encouraged to host internal spelling competitions, in order to assist struggling learners.

CONCLUSION

In South African schools, learners are taught in their mother tongue from Grade R to 3, and then the medium of instruction changes to English from Grade 4 onwards. This transition causes learners to battle with the following: incorrect spelling and grammar, incomplete sentences, mixing of languages, using words that do not exist, incorrect tenses, failure to construct simple sentences in English, failure to engage in classroom discussions, taking time to finish tasks/activities, and struggling to define science concepts in English. Also, learners have limited vocabulary and struggle with the grammar of gender in English. These learners enter high schools with these inadequacies in English and proceed with them to tertiary level. For those who manage to proceed beyond tertiary institutions, they are likely to have limited job opportunities that an English native speaker is likely to benefit from. The debate of language usage in South African schools continues among linguists, and the issue remains unsolved. It could take years to resolve the issue but, in the meantime, non-native English-speaking learners continue to struggle in schools.

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