Language-related Barriers to Learning in a Rural English as a Second Language Classroom in South Africa

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Abstract The issue of language in a bilingual classroom remains a subject of academic debate in South Africa due to the dominance of English as a medium of instruction in most academic institutions. As a minority language, English dominates education, economic and other spheres and its hegemony threatens the role of indigenous languages in learning. However, poor mastery of English posits a challenge, and while it is key to learning, it comes across as a barrier, especially in rural schools, where exposure to the language in most cases is limited to the classroom. Using a literature review, this article discusses some of the language challenges in a bilingual classroom within the rural South African context where the majority of learners speak an indigenous language as their first language. It (article) observes that is some instances there are challenges with regards to teacher preparedness to deal with language (grammar) demands of learners, and that the sole use of English as a medium of instruction in the classroom also presents a barrier to learning. It concludes, inter alia, that language should be taught by language teachers; learners need to be supported during the transition from mother tongue instruction to the English medium of instruction; and that learners' first language ought to be used in the English-as-a-Second Language classroom, as this would mean that learners are able to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, which would benefit both their first language as well as the second language (English).

Keywords: bilingual classroom, English, language barrier, indigenous language, rural context

1. Introduction

South Africa is confronted with the disappointing Grade 12 examination results of learners annually whose home language is an African language. These results reflect the inequalities in African society as far as language is concerned (Postma & Postma, 2011) [1]. Central to the debate of language teaching are pertinent issues related to the choice of using English as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) which contributes to the general difficulties experienced in most public schools by both teachers and learners in using English as a LoLT (Rudwick, 2004) [2]. The current situation in public schools today highlights the need for language-related research in order to present issues in a complex multi-lingual country which are linguistic in nature, issues which impede the language learning in the classroom in various ways. The role of English language is pivotal in academia as either a facilitator of academic work or a barrier to those who cannot comprehend information presented in it, both in academic development and in assessment of learners' work.

The reality is that the everyday language teaching in schools is overwhelmed by second language learning of English by first language (L1) speakers of indigenous languages some of whom do not have intuitive mastery of the English language, both grammatical and semantic systems and, as a result, this has impact on the learning of other subjects. Broom (2004) [3] argues that there is strong evidence that there is a high demand for education in English by the majority of the population, even though their home language (HL) may not be English, which has resulted in some parents moving their children away from rural schools into schools where the LoLT is English.

This article discusses some of the language-related challenges in a rural bilingual classroom in South Africa. It focuses on reading and literacy challenges; issues of language teaching; need for learner support during transition to the English MOI; access to LoLT in rural areas; and the teaching of language by non-language specialists.

2. Research Methodology

This article used a literature review method. An effective and well conducted review as a research method creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development (Webster & Watson, 2002) [4]. In support of the method, Lin (2009) [5] argues that it has special values in distinguishing the past trends and forecasting future models.

3. Reading and Literacy Challenges

In the South African school context, especially in rural schools, reading and literacy problems tend to be masked by language proficiency issues. It is assumed that poor academic performance is caused by poor mother tongue proficiency. The assumption is that when learners have difficulty with 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 are closely interwoven, according to Pretorius (2002:174) [6]. English in South African schools is used as the main LoLT in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase with the exception of isiZulu, which is offered as a subject in most schools in KwaZulu-Natal province.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2011 is an international study of reading literacy which is conducted every five years, and forty countries participated, including South Africa. South African learners, lamentably, performed worst when compared to other countries. PIRLS assessments had included a set of questions asking parents how well their children could do the early literacy activities when first entering primary school, namely: to recognise most of the alphabet, write letters of the alphabet, read some words, write some words, and read sentences. Unsurprisingly, according to Kapp (2004:260-261) [7], Black African learners are often labelled as at risk or disadvantaged as a result of the linguistic, cognitive and social transition they have to make when entering Higher Education (HE) where English dominates. The 2014 National Benchmark Test (NBT) revealed that about 33% of applicants are ready to cope with the academic literacy demands which they will face in tertiary courses; more than 50% need extended or additional forms of academic support and provision if they are to succeed in HE; and between 10% and 15% will struggle to cope with the demands of academic literacy if they do not get ongoing, intensive and specific forms of academic support and provision. Burkett et al. (2001) [8] and Rudwick (2004) [2] argue that it is difficult to teach and learn through a second language when neither teachers nor learners speak it well enough.

An observation by Howie et al. (2008) [9] is that learners who are at risk often have parents who had difficulty learning to read, and they (learners) may come from poor neighbourhoods; and are likely to attend schools in which classroom practices are deemed ineffective. However, none of these factors is an automatic barrier to literacy, and none of them functions in isolation as a single causal factor of reading difficulties. The authors (Howie et al., 2008) [9] further argue that the existence of poor language use among learners in rural communities may be a result of under-resourcing, poor teaching practices, inadequate training in reading practices and lack of available resources for the indigenous languages, a lack of motivation to modify the situation, the oral tradition of the indigenous languages, the general role and influence of television, and a function of the time we live in, where instant fulfilment in so many aspects of life is proliferated.

A study conducted by Desai in 2010 revealed that learners are struggling to express themselves in English in Grade 4. The author postulates that while improvement is noted in Grade 7, the learners' proficiency in English is nowhere near the requirements for using it as sole medium of instruction (MOI). Some of the observations made are: the 'story' aspect is completely lost in the English version; spelling and grammatical errors abound; and samples show learners' difficulty in forming sentences (Desai, 2010:330) [10].

4. Issues of Language Teaching

Issues of language teaching must be addressed in terms of accuracy and pronunciation, and the understanding of grammar rules must be well addressed in the classroom for a learning atmosphere conducive to learning. Perkins (2013:295) [11] argues that the reading teacher needs to analyse, synthesise and evaluate these perspectives on reading and pitch them alongside the knowledge of teaching of children and of schools as an inseparable part of communities. This is because some terms can be used to mean different ideas and to become a member of a discourse community means much more than learning the language - it also includes cultural aspects of a language as well. Unfortunately, many teachers, especially in rural areas, are not adequately qualified for the teaching of language (grammar). This is a serious problem to the study of language and it raises concerns such as those highlighted by Rudwick (2004) [2] when she postulates the probability of the amount of language content which may be transferred from teacher to learners when both teacher and learners do not understand knowledge presented in English. Poor academic literacy is a result of second language (L2) instruction where both the teacher and learners are struggling with the use of English as LoLT (Rudwick, 2004) [2]. The majority of teachers in South Africa, especially those who teach in rural schools, are not mother-tongue speakers of English, and are therefore, subject to committing grammatical errors when they teach English since they themselves are still learning to teach in English, especially those without much teaching experience.

If the linguistic analysis skill is missing from the teachers who teach language, there is very little or none that could be transferred to the learners, since the reality on the ground is that learners look up to the teacher as the knowledgeable other. It is important, therefore, that language teachers are fully prepared and equipped with knowledge of the types of reading, writing and speaking experiences which their learners experience when learning a language. This would help the teachers to understand the required knowledge, skills, resources and remedy which

are relevant and effective in their journey towards language learning and academic excellence.

English language teachers need to understand the cultural, linguistic and cognitive dimensions involved in the study of English by bilingual learners in order to design pedagogies that effectively support language learning for bilingual learners. This could be easier if language teachers are introduced to linguistics before they study teaching methods. Such action could help language teachers understand why learners make the errors which they do, and it could cast light on where those errors come from.

Another challenge to language teachers in the mainstream schools is that they (teachers) work in under-resourced schools with undernourished learners. These teachers are expected to teach beginning literacy in the mother tongue, communicative language skills in the exogenous (ex-colonial) language, and curricular content in both, requiring that they be as bilingual and bi-literate as possible (Kosonen & Benson, 2013) [12].

A study conducted by Nel et. al. (2013) [13] at the University of South Africa (UNISA) discovered that both student teachers and their learners were struggling with grammatical use of English inside the classroom. The problems encountered included phonological and pronunciation errors, spelling errors, syntactic errors, over-generalisation, the use of the prepositions, confusion of gender, and problems with tenses. Looking at these problems which were experienced by level four students, it could be argued that these would continue and have very bad consequences to the learners whom they (student teachers) would produce. Bridging the gap may not always come naturally to teachers since they themselves have gone through an alienating school system which has not prepared them to tailor schooling to their learners' needs. However, it could be argued that in the bilingual language teaching journey, learners learn best if they receive the content in both their L1 and their L2. This means learners' L1 has a role to play in their learning.

Bilingual education in Southern Africa remains a challenging issue, especially when it comes to the use of English for both social and academic purposes. Contrary to Heugh (2012) [14] who claims that questions to language problems have been answered through research conducted in South Africa, Hoardley's (2012) [15] assertion that the question of how much learning in L2 affects achievement remains open.

One of the bilingual language practices in South African rural schools is that language planners have to make decisions about languages being taught as subjects, and the language(s) being used as the MOIs or LoLTs (Broom, 2004) [3]. The confusion is created inside the classroom, where learners are told not to express themselves in L1, yet they have little or no knowledge of the English language, and even teachers themselves are still struggling with its use, in both spoken and written forms (Rudwick, 2004 [2]; Pretorius & Matjila, 2004) [16]). Studies have shown that learners' L1 should be used to their (learners') benefit. A study by Algazo (2018) [17] found, inter alia, that teachers used L1 in order to motivate learners to make judicious use of their L1 in the classroom and complete L2 tasks.

5. Need for Learner Support During Transition to the English MOI

The Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) (1997) [18] stipulates that children should start learning at school in HL until Grade 3. The idea here is that learners should be grounded in their L1 and access education through this medium before they are introduced to the English MOI. However, like in other policies, the implementation of the LiEP varies, since there are schools that introduce learners to English MOI earlier than others. As Plüddemann (2015: 188) [19] claims, 'a policy is a process that carries an ideological load, and is subject to interpretation by competing interest groups in ways that reflect power relations between them'.

In most schools, there is a change in the MOI for all the school subjects from Grade 4, from an indigenous language, isiZulu in this case, to English, until tertiary level. Considering the fact that the MOI for the majority of children changes at Grade 4 in South African government schools, and that isiZulu is taught as a subject from Grade 4 onwards, a strong instruction on grammar is needed in order to root the English language use and practice until tertiary level. Such an idea would be useful in the development of literacy in rural schools, especially due to limited exposure to English. As Ntshakala and Mncwango (2021) [20] observe, in many rural schools, learners only encounter English in the classroom due to the dominance of their L1 outside the classroom. A study conducted by Strickland et al. (2002) [21] found that children who are particularly at risk of encountering reading difficulties typically have a history of preschool language impairment, limited proficiency in English, or come from homes where a non-standard dialect of English is spoken. In support, Fouche (2009) [22] has argued that teaching learners in a language they do not understand increases the risk of failure.

6. Access to LoLT in Rural Areas

According to Theron and Nel (2005:228) [23], language barriers can be aggravated by a LoLT in which the learners are not proficient, by poor educator communication skills, and inadequate classroom communication. The rural and urban Black learners who have the least exposure to English in their daily lives, and who, therefore, have the widest gap to make up as they learn through the English MOI at school, must be well catered for in the literacy programmes which should be developed in each poorly resourced school. Since there are very few schools which deliver the curriculum bilingually (Bailey et al., 2008) [24], most learners who are learning in English are likely to be seriously disadvantaged and to underperform in other subjects as well. As Phillips (2004) [25] contends, the academic success of English MOI learners is not adequately supported throughout the schooling system.

L2 learners of English often exhibit the problems associated with learning a new language, problems such as comprehension and articulation difficulties, limited vocabulary, and grammatical errors in their writing and

speaking. If a learner who is learning English as an L2 finds it difficult to achieve a particular level of language acquisition and proficiency, then transmission of knowledge and information becomes difficult and, in turn, teaching and learning of English becomes challenging for both the teacher and the learner (Shepard, 2000) [26]. Another linguistic obstacle is postulated by Sheets (2002:47) [27] who argues that learners in the mainstream classroom might understand input, but may not be able to produce output that expresses their understanding.

7. The Teaching of Language by Non-language Specialists

The shortage of adequately qualified language (English) teachers in rural schools also contributes to language challenges in the classroom. Mkhatshwa (2005) [28] established from his university students' work that it cannot be presumed that non-native speakers would have knowledge of the structure of a given language and working of the English language without explicit instruction. This grammatical knowledge of sentential structure, as argued by Mkhatshwa (ibid), also applies to native speakers in order for them to fully appreciate and negotiate meaning, in terms of what they mean to say exactly. It is, therefore, expected that a language teacher should be in a position to detect language errors, explain them, and try to remedy the problems. However, studies have found that most teachers in the mainstream schools cannot detect and explain how errors ought to be corrected, which is one of the reasons why most learners who have passed their matriculation cannot read and write. This is seen through a number of first year students who are admitted to some HE institutions, whose linguistic competence is not at the expected level, the outcome of which is poor performance in their (students') studies at these institutions. It could then be argued that learners' lack of sentential structure restricts their ability to access information in the form of thoughts and ideas. This is worse if both the teacher and the learners do not have knowledge of grammatical structure, and even worst if language is taught by a non-language specialist. If a language, English or any other language, is taught by any teacher who is not a language specialist, a teacher who, in his/her training does not have grammatical knowledge, both the teacher and the learners would be unable to identify, interpret and analyse the main idea in any given sentence in English, according to Mkhatshwa (2005).

De Klerk (1992) [29] argues that knowledge of linguistics provides the necessary theoretical framework for the presentation of any language, and that contemporary linguistics, with its emphasis on language in society and culture provides the teacher with important insights into the teaching of language. This assertion implies that a teacher trained in linguistics is the best teacher to teach grammar of a language. Language teachers need the knowledge of grammar in order for them to be in a position to teach language as per the learners' linguistic needs. The teacher needs to identify the learners' needs of a language before introducing them to it. Teachers who are trained in the provision of relevant linguistic strategies and skills for language teaching are in a good position to help learners transfer English knowledge back into their HL, and vice versa (Makhathini & Mncwango (2020) [30].

Since the majority of South African learners go to public schools, learning and teaching cannot be equated to schools with resources. However, knowledge of linguistics could be of great help if language teaching is done by qualified language teachers and some of the linguistic barriers which are experienced would be resolved. This would benefit both the teachers and the learners in terms of knowledge of the structure, function and use of language and with the varieties of language which are necessary in the mastery of both literary and non-literary texts. The manner in which language teaching and learning is facilitated in some schools makes it hard for the learners to master language accordingly since the current learning opportunities are not designed to meet the basic learning needs of the learners. Likewise, education cannot possibly be equitable and non-discriminatory when the MOI is a language that neither the teacher nor the learners can use sufficiently. Mpofu-Chimbga and Meier (2014) [31] assert that it is apparent that English seems to guarantee an easy path into global, commercial and other spheres, therefore, improved teaching methods are the way to go in order to ensure that learners master it.

8. Conclusion

In a situation where learners struggle with the command of language, there is no guarantee that they will succeed in their studies, since language is key to learning. Their linguistic situation then negatively affects them in their subjects and in their quest to access learning.

It has been shown that there are problems which emerge regarding L2 instruction and that the current implementation of policies and teaching methods need to be re-visited to focus attention on the grammatical competence of learners, especially in L2. The need for language to be taught by qualified language teachers cannot be underscored, and so is the need for learner support, especially after the transition from L1 MOI to L2 (English) MOI. L1 should be granted the opportunity to be used in the L2 (English) classroom in order for learners to benefit from their whole linguistic repertoire. Cenoz and Gorter (2020: 304) [32] opine that "multilingual speakers can be more effective learners and users of a target language if they are allowed to use resources from their whole linguistic repertoire".

The LiEP (1997) [18] that applies to general education is meant to facilitate learning and teaching of languages in a manner that diminishes the linguistic and cultural barriers to learning. It is, however, noted that the LoLT is still a barrier in some parts of the country as far as education is concerned and this should not be allowed to continue unabated if access to learning is the objective and success is the ultimate goal.

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