

Instructional Language Dichotomy on Foundation Phase Learning: A Case of University Student Teachers

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Abstract

For proficiency in language learning, the prescribed medium of instruction for Foundation Phase (FP) learning becomes a prerequisite, as demarcated by South African policy on language learning. Nevertheless, student teachers while embarking on Teaching Practise (TP) find comfort at infusing the English medium when interacting with learners. In contradiction, English language learning is compromised as most subjects underpinning the FP curriculum are offered in home languages. This paradox of mixed opinions on policy, student teacher perspective hence their medium of learning is English language for all courses offered at university level, together with the situation where students are expected to consider FP curriculum offering, really causes some inconsistency, leading to compromised English language proficiency as both student teachers and learners infuse IsiXhosa to a greater extent during the entire process. This paper therefore seeks to investigate whether home language teaching has any substantial influence towards enhancing English language as one of the subjects underpinning FP curriculum. A qualitative approach embedded in a case study design was administered on two purposefully identified university teachers as pioneers expected to conduct assessment during practise teaching. To collect data, semi structured interviews were conducted to understand better the underlying factors caused by instructional language contradiction in-between student teachers and learners. It emerged as major findings that (i) conflicting media of instruction (in university and in schools), (ii) home language dominance, and (iii) policy imperatives were challenging causes on the declining English proficiency in learners. This paper concludes and recommends that for sustained English language development, policies underpinning teaching and learning need to be re-defined as all subjects offered rely on efficient attainment of the language component, thereby leading to improved learner throughput rate.

Keywords: language policy, academic attainment, curriculum, medium of instruction, home language

1. Introduction

An instructional language refers to a language and or languages that learners understand during teaching-learning processes in a schooling environment (Stoop, 2017). The language that learners speak at home with their siblings is termed as a mother tongue, first language or home language (Krause, 2018). Nations are bequeathed with this special gift called language. Learners from different nations speak, understand, listen and communicate in different mother tongues or languages. Stoop (2017) proposes that mother tongue teaching and learning is accepted for its renowned rewards to the expected production by learner component.

In South Africa, mother-tongue instruction has been highly contested since the independence of 1994. For the past years, students from different universities in South Africa were up in arms holding meetings with authorities requesting and demanding that they be taught in their home languages. However, students seeing that their demands were not met, toyi-toyies have ensued in all the South African Universities. For a South African perspective, learner-home language instruction and learning has been considered as one of the critical human rights (Trudell et al., 2012). This essential right is clearly outlined by Section 29(2) as contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South (RSA 1996).

Studies conducted by UNESCO reveal that young learners learn literacy best when they are taught in their mother tongue (UNESCO, 2008). In the past years it has been emphasized that there is some essence of learners home-language teaching (Eloff, 2017). A study which was conducted in Mali attested that learners who are taught in consideration of home language instruction improved their performance by an agreeable rate as compared to their counter parts who were taught in French (Eloff, 2017).

Therefore, different philosophers recommend that for the first three years of primary schooling, teaching and learning for African young learners should be conducted in their mother tongues before swapping to English (Foley, 2007). The South African education system has adhered to these recommendations, because as proposed by language policy, curriculum for learners at their earliest years is administered in home language instruction, only to language-switch to English medium instruction when they get enrolled for grade four. Bloch (2013) opines that more than three years are an overwhelming task to comprehend the language with deeper insight, thereby further recommending that for the first six years of their schooling young learners need home-language engagements as that would greatly assist at making them better understand dynamics of any language they are not familiar with (Cook, 2013).

It is for this reason that promoters of mother tongue believe and endorse that teaching and learning be conducted in a language spoken at home and well understood by learners, as well, be used as the solution to declining academic results (Krause, 2018). The study conducted by PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) discovered that majority in learner numbers performed extremely well when they write in their mother tongue (Eloff, 2017; Spaul, 2017). PIRLS (2016) associated decline in learner progression for learners emanating from disadvantaged backgrounds with the language used in teaching and learning when different learners get exposure to diverse spoken languages.

2. Literature Review

As the country South Africa is renowned of its cultural diversity, so is the broadness of diverse languages used across communities. Therefore, as opined by Kim and Suárez-Orozco (2015), prescribed policy on language learning is prominent for multilingual communities, maintenance of languages granted as official, as well as respect for each language consequently. It is a language policy that seeks protection, thereby improving diversity in culture and languages. In observance of human rights both teachers and learners are expected to be responsible citizens in preserving home languages, concurrently making provisions for effectively administering acquisition of languages granted as additional (Otheguy & Zentella, 2012).

Additionally, a home language is referred to as a medium that learners practise within their immediate environment. South African learners in their greatest percentages due to diversity in cultural backgrounds, have differing linguistic constituencies. This is one of the major reasons that leads to experiencing learning difficulties in language learning, affecting both teachers and learners. In line with the study by Awopetu (2016), it was discovered that learners who were offered home language instruction were noted to be better performing than those receiving instruction in an unfamiliar language. Home language effect, in this instance, could be attributed to non-wasted precious time on translating unfamiliar and unknown English terms, into a language that learners are well conversant with. As opined by Bester et al. (2019),

learners display some confidence when they feel they are acquainted with whatever language learnt. This denotes that if learners have become confident with profound foundation of home languages, they are bound to easily acquire whatever accessible additional language. We therefore propose for home language instruction as this is the first encountered language of learning and communication, more so that a variety of language learning skills like speaking, reading, writing, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and comprehending with texts, would be holistically developed (DBE, 2019).

In light of the discussions above, language policy highlights for varying learner needs are presented. Nevertheless, there seems to be contrast between university student teachers and learners in the studied school. University teachers as assessors when student teachers engage on Work Integrated Learning (WIL), are caught in the middle as they expect a swift flow of lessons conducted in English medium, only to observe language divide caused by home language instruction (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). The entire process results at infusion of most home language terminologies during English teaching. For FP learning, English learning is then compromised as home language overhauls learning, leading to lowered academic attainment for English as one of the fundamental subjects. This was reported to be evident also in higher grades due to English medium transition actioned as soon as learners progress from FP to Intermediate Phase (IP) where language policy drastically requires First Additional Language (FAL) instruction that cuts across all the subjects underpinning the curriculum (South African Yearbook, 2015).

This investigation is underpinned by the Theory of Variation (Tong, 2012). This theory proposes for new ways to tackle challenging aspects encountered during the processes of teaching and learning. Aspects noted by this theory include, but not limited to language logistics like reading and writing. In language learning, learners are discovered by this theory to have difficulties to comprehend with the given texts, let alone pronouncing words efficiently and in an effective manner. Educationally, as advocated by this theory that there is no single way to understand experience or think about a particular phenomenon; this therefore implies that it becomes the duty of English language teacher to devise means for learners to better conceptualise the unfamiliar language they are not well vexed with (Aguilar & Solorio, 2019). Learners, as clients to the second language learning, need to be nurtured in whatever means possible. At this instance, English language teachers are expected to engage at a closer range with learners engulfed in home language instruction. To curb the situation, teachers could also trend an extra mile by bringing into class some learning material to help enhance vocabulary for the new language to be learnt (Devlin, Chang, Lee & Toutanova, 2018).

3. Methodology

Approach

In this examination a qualitative research approach seemed the most suitable as it particularly deals with processes of assembling and clarification of data types which are non-numerical, with underlying purposes to better understand human-social environmental logistics. Embedded in this qualitative examination is a case study design with its characteristics of being able to generate in-depth understanding experienced by humans in their real-life complexities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It was for this reason that we developed an urge to have innate understanding of some hidden factors in relation to home language teaching versus English language enhancement among Foundation Phase learners. For learners to be expected by university student teachers to be well vexed with dynamics of English language, with its diverse aspects like speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and pronunciation, yet the entire subjects offered in the prescribed curriculum being offered in home languages, really raises some alarm bells for student teachers when undertaking Practise Teaching (PT).

Sampling

The sample of this investigation composed of two university teachers. These participants were purposefully identified for two different reasons. As articulated by Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick and Lavoie-Tremblay (2020), this cohort of participants were the most relevant personnel as they have long been offering English language as one of the subjects underpinning university curriculum. Additionally, this cohort of teachers were pioneers as they had consistently conducted assessment on student teaching during PT way back when policy advocated for English medium to be the recognised language of learning. Drastic policy imperatives of switching to home language instruction therefore impacted on them as assessors. For obtaining primary data to this investigation, these two participants proved to be of value.

Research Instruments

Brinkman (2013) asserts that semi structured interviews act as a worthwhile data collection instrument. As the interview scheduled was mainly formed of open-ended questions, this led to both interviewees and interviewers engaging in lengthy vigorous discussions. This entire process probed us to throw some follow up questions. As participants voluntarily shared their experiences in relation to challenges they encountered when assessing teacher students whose medium of instruction is English for all subjects studied at university level, as against learners who only got a taste of English language only during such allocated teaching periods, deliberations became so vibrant and so much interesting. We therefore ensured that not even a single response is not considered useful and worthwhile (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley & McKenna, 2017).

Method of Data Analysis

As we were done administering interviews, we started another thought-provoking process. This was a period when all recorded data was played and re-played time and again (Myers, 2020).

To someone not a scholar, it would seem as if time was wasted, yet, on the other side, we knew thoroughly well the essence of the entire exercise. Not even a single response was ignored or taken for granted when transcriptions were done (Timonen, Foley & Conlon, 2018). Similar and related responses were gathered into categories and codes (Sweetman, Badiie & Creswell, 2010), thereby leading to formation of themes discussed as findings below.

4. Findings and Discussion

The paper sought to investigate whether home language teaching has any substantial influence towards enhancing English language as one of the subjects underpinning FP curriculum. The findings revealed that most of the schools, where university student teachers were practicing teaching, have adopted a policy of home language teaching. English language is therefore compromised, not being seriously considered as the language of teaching and learning by some individuals. Regrettable is the finding that student teachers were using both English and Isixhosa home language and found it comfortable using the home languages. Although English is an international language of learning and teaching, the situation of home language use deprives the influence of English in pursuing the curriculum for better learner results. The situation also bears a negative choice for learners in their preferences of language use. This is because student teachers would teach using both languages as a way of clarifying the concept or extract taught. To Myrincia (2022) such a strategy posed an experience of language learning difficulties in the classroom. Authors also observed that it easier for learners to understand the content taught in a home language, meaning that chances of enhancing English are diminishing. It has been noted that even in teaching English as a subject in the FP, the language of instruction had tendencies of being dominated by a home language. To this end, Sad (2010) argues that teaching English in a vernacular language does not promote English as an international policy language use.

5. Recommendations

Language used in the FP teaching impacts positively to the growth of understanding by learners. This notion recommends that English language must be used as language of teaching and learning in the FP. This recommendation points to the understanding that English language is used in the whole world as a medium of instruction in the education system.

6. Conclusion

The education system plays a great developmental role in the society. This prominence advocates for using English as a language of instruction in schools. In other words, English determines success of the education system to benefit the whole society and the academic achievement of all the learners (Appiah & Ardila, 2021). It is understandable that learners prefer to be taught in their home language which makes it easy for them to express themselves. However, subjects taught at school are mostly in English medium and as such English as a fundamental subject is deprived of prominence when used as a dual language to the home language.

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